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PRESERVING A MAN, FIXING A SHADOW

Gay Block

At the time of his death in February 1993, at the age of fifty, Paul Monette was the author of many books, wide in range, from carefully-wrought poetry and sharp, insightful essays, to popular fiction and novelizations of several screenplays. The works for which he is best known, however, are the two autobiographical memoirs, Borrowed Time and Becoming a Man. As Monette matured as a writer and as his subject matter came closer to echo his own life—the life of a gay man living in the time of AIDS—the photographs that appeared on his books shifted and changed to reflect his growing awareness of who he was and how he wanted his photographed image to express certain values that he held. The look of these various portraits is quite wide-ranging, nearly every book includes a different image.

Several years ago the photographer Gay Block and the writer Malika Druecker met Monette and his companion Winston Wilde at an exhibition at Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco. From that meeting developed a friendship that included visits to Monette’s house in Los Angeles and a trip to Italy. From that friendship also emerged the portrait by Block that appears on the jacket of Monette’s collection of essays Last Watch of the Night. In a note to the book Fifty Texas Artists (San Francisco Chronicle Books, 1986), for which she photographed the artists represented, Block wrote that the intention was to “make pictures that would record my subjects’ physical beings and also, through physiognomy, relay some impression of their inner selves.” This certainly is what her portrait of Monette accomplishes. It is an image that speaks of wisdom and experience, of sadness and pain, and of the knowledge that comes from both experience and study. It is also an image that shows fully the emotional depth of Block’s friendship with Monette.

The following interview was suggested when I noticed how Monette’s image changed from one book to another and how these changing images carried with them echoes of Renaissance camar portraits. It was conducted by Gay Block at Paul Monette’s West Hollywood home. Some editing has been done to eliminate personal references that do not bear on the central topic of the interview.

—Ed Ososki

Paul Monette: It’s beyond ironic that we’re doing this when I am feeling so disequibrated, so unphotographable. I think that the photographs that you took of me in February [for Last Watch of the Night] are sort of the last that I want to look at. And I’m sure I have a larger case of “vanity, vanity, all is vanity,” than I usually do in life. I am very highly aware of how orchestrated the process always was, and how much input I always had in it.

There are, after all, many authors who just have a breezy picture taken, or don’t want a picture at all. I really was possessed with the notion of becoming a kind of Shelleyan poet figure. And then, as soon as I came out, and I started to work on gay work, it was terribly important that I look good, that I look sexy.

After I came out, I knew exactly what I was going to show. I spent the first twenty years of my life thinking of myself as deeply pudgy and unattractive—“bodyless”—which is the word I used so often in Becoming a Man. I guess it was an attempt to freeze a moment in which my “bodylessness” would not be the most important thing. I would conquer that feeling of “bodylessness” by presenting a good picture. I might have been able to psychosomatically some of that even at the time.

Gay Block: The self-image stuff, you mean, in terms of your past?

PM: The poems in this first book, The Carpenter at the Atrium, are just riddled with self-hatred, confusion and unhappiness. And the picture isn’t, because I wanted to present the glamorous, young, suffering poet. Can you see that there is a rose at the top of that picture? That is a silk rose that the girlfriend was living with at the time brought back from Paris for me. And that is such a studied pose. I am actually sitting at my desk in Cambridge, and I have happy memories of that. I was only teaching half-time, I had moved from Milton where the school was, to Cambridge, and spent two years living right near Harvard Square, and feeling that sense of excitement and bohemian authenticity. I guess I think of that as my real education. I had heard of your Yale education, and my Andover education. Whereas those two years in Cambridge, going to poetry readings three and four times a week, and going to literary parties all the time. Everything was about books and poetry; it was a wonderful, wonderful time in my life.

GB: Do you remember Miles West, giving him some instruction of some kind?

PM: Yeah, he was a friend who actually worked at Little, Brown, and he used that as a pseudonym. Because he designed the book as well, and he didn’t want his name [Jeffrey Griswold] put on the photograph as the designer’s name. Jeffrey has since died of AIDS, but he was very willing for me to set it up and get it exactly the way I wanted it.

GB: And you told him you wanted to look successful?

PM: I wanted to look—Byronic, or Shelleyan, or Keatsian—I wanted to be the young romantic poet. He understood that right away. It was years later that I talked to Richard Avedon about how (Marlene) Dietrich had controlled the photograph he took of her. How he just let it happen because she seemed to very, very tuned into what she wanted to look like.

I mean, I’ve done a lot of thinking in my life about how any of us as subjects of photographs control the process, whether that’s good or bad. I don’t feel that Native American belief of “you lose your soul” when you take a picture of me. I don’t feel that way. I guess I just feel a longing to orchestrate.

GB: Let me talk to you just a minute, because we are doing this together. I’ve had a few portraits made of myself, too. And when we talked last night, you said, “I’ve been doing some things about you.”

Today, I’m on my way over here, and I thought: “thinking”—it’s almost something I don’t say, that I do think now. But the things that I do don’t come out of a thought process.

PM: And thinking is anathema, maybe to you.

GB: That’s right. So, I’ve had people make portraits of me, and leave done a few self-portraits, never thinking that I was going to look beautiful or sexy, but instead, wanting to look—as a person with depth—as a person who has been—allday, nice, fine. Wanting to say—just because you know this or that, you don’t know me. Here is who I am. There is depth, there is pain, there is stuff behind here that I want you to see. I think, that’s where I’ve been with images I’ve had made of myself.

When I come to take your picture for Last Watch of the Night, I thought, OK, I’ve had some success as a portrait photographer. I’ve had a show at MMFA. I have begun to do portraits. But still every time I do a portrait, I’m nervous. Am I really going to do something here? And I walked in and Winston was in his t-shirt, and was getting ready to leave and do his shootout at the gym. And I’m thinking, Oh, I would really love to have Winston somewhere in the picture. I love his arms, and his pecs, and his t-shirt.

But I didn’t say anything. I was shy about it, and this is not unusual. I won’t say what I want. And we sit here and talk. Then Winston says, “OK, I’m going to work out now.” And he comes and kisses you goodbye, and finally I say, to myself, Gay, open your mouth, are you crazy?

Miles West, Paul Monette from The Last Watch of the Night, 1993

Miles West, Paul Monette from The Carpenter at the Atrium, 1971
**INTERVIEW**

Star Black, Paul Monette, 1989

"Winston, would you please stay for a few minutes?" [Laughter] And of course, it was fine.

And I really love that picture particularly, but I also really like the one of his kissing you—just what happens, happens. You talk about the glamorous snap, sure that picture will be, as you called it, the last one that you might want to look at. We'll hope that's not so.

PM: We'll hope that's not so. And also, that one, definitely not just to me, but to you. I mean exactly what you mean, depth and experience, and maybe even wisdom.

GB: That's what I wanted—the depth of you, and with Winston in it. The fact that some of us is alone, and that is our backdoor, our background, our strength. So, it was very wonderful for me to be here to take that picture.

PM: And what do you think of a picture like this [the author's photo with the silk rose]? He's so young, he's so young!

GB: Oh, but it's lovely—and it's got a load of those [laughter]. No, I can't tell this is "not you." It's sort of like the raised eyebrows—there is a sense of working at it, of "This is what I wanted to look." I can think that there's a pose going on here.

PM: Because the irony is you can't take that pose and put it on your world and, I mean, you would be stiff, you'd look like a clown. One is fluid, much more fluid than that. That always struck me as one of the danger waters of photographs, especially of me as a tubby teenager. And I'd look at these pictures, and [think] Oh my God! Look how many pimples I have!

[Editor's Note: The discussion turns to his jacket portrait in Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll]

This photograph horrified my parents. It became part and parcel of their reading this novel, Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll, and saying, 'You've destroyed your life. You'll never get a job, because you're coming out as gay, and we're going to have to sell our house and leave town.'

And I said, "Well, it's a comic novel, and you'll just have to deal with it." And my mother said, "And this picture?" Now, that picture—it was less composed by way of the details of one's eyebrows. I wanted to show an attitude of being a young, gay man in an urban context.

GB: Which is your favorite [author] picture of all your books?

PM: Besides yours, my favorite picture, I guess is the picture of me and Roger on the cover of Love Alone, because it's so accidental and so composed and so—nearly lost.

GB: Is it the one in Italy?

PM: Yeah, right. In Tuscany. Yeah, I didn't find the roll of film until several months after Roger died—a month before he died. And I went and had it done and suddenly there were these pictures from this monastery, including the one that the brother had taken of the two of us. And certainly that would be the opposite of this composed a face for the faces one meets. It captures some tenderness and togetherness and joy that couldn't be composed.

GB: This is The Gold Diggers. What year is this?

PM: I think '79. That's by my friend, Star [Black]. She took probably three or four of the pictures that are on my books. And she was the sort of photographer who shot hundreds and hundreds of exposures, so I just didn't have any—I couldn't control one thing and another.

And Roger Horwitz, [Paul's partner who died of AIDS in 1986] took the photograph. And that shows me standing against a wall of the espladnade next to the Charles [River in Cambridge], which is where I spent really most of my time, and where our apartment faced. And Roger kept saying [comic voice] "Smile!" And I said, "No, no, no, I think I want brooding here." So, I think, that's why I ended up brooding rather than smiling. And there, I guess, I'm about 28 or 29. In other words, the first photograph [with the silk rose] shows me composing myself out of fictions, and not willing to admit that I'm gay. The second photograph [against the stone railing] may have me composing in the same way, but it's very much about being gay, and having that freedom. Thus, it's not surprising that it's outdoors, rather than indoors, that it's in thrown-on clothes and there ain't no silk roses in that picture.

GB: This is like, This is who I am, it's who I want [to be]. And of course, you are handsome. You're thin.

PM: So thin, I know—a long-time ago thin. I don't like being thin any more. But the chubby child had, in fact, headed East. [Smiles] GB: So, you were trying to look slightly tough here? Why?

PM: I guess, because my new project in life was to conquer Hollywood, and to see if I could write about Hollywood the way Proust wrote about Paris, to give you the most painful embarrassment about it. One likes to think that one is accurate in thinking that Hannah Arendt never worried whether she combed her hair for her picture or not—she didn't care what the cover looked like. Maybe she did. But one feels that she is so devoted to the body of the text, and to the primacy of the text, that there is no room for glamming it up or pretending it's something else.

GB: That's so interesting how this is a late '70s picture. More than the last one—Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll! The first one is a real '70s picture. It's like Roger's picture is more timeless, it feels to me.

PM: Maybe that's because of an attempt to create an image with this one, and the first one. The [author's] image on Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll was just a little more natural, a little more real. And it's interesting to me that the second edition of The Gold Diggers is a much more natural picture as well. That was taken by Star in Taos, about a month and a half after Roger died. We went to New Mexico where I wrote my big poem about Lawrence. And it was a very, very snowy day, the opposite of Southern California.

Roger had died in October, and she [Star Black], came out to spend Christmas with me, and convinced me to go to New Mexico with her. And it was the first time I thought about going some place without Roger, or that we'd never been. And we stayed in Albuquerque for a night at her aunt's and then went to Santa Fe. But I was very eager to get to Taos and see the Lawrence grave. So, that [author photo] actually was taken in the plaza in Taos on a bright, bright snowy day. Gorgeous, gorgeous weather. Again, she took many, many pictures that day of me wearing that black and white wool thing. Partially the reason it didn't feel terribly posed was the exhilaration of the cold weather and all—it didn't give you the chance to be languid or too self-conscious.

GB: If you had written this piece instead of our doing it in that film [video tape], what do you think would have been your overall theme?

PM: 5

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GB: There is also an author photograph on the flap of this, again taken by Stas.
PM:—surely the most unlikely author photograph imaginable for that book, [Love Alone.]
GB: This big smile.
PM: Big smile and wearing a sexy shirt. Michael Deneny, when I sent him some proofs to look at, zeroed in on this one immediately. I said, "Well, it's actual. I was there that day, and this was a picture she took." I said, "Doesn't it seem a little incongruous for this book?" And Michael said, "Well, it's different from the congruity of the character, but you're wearing what we're using on the front [with Roger]. But what's wrong with showing you alive?" And I thought that was actually pretty sensitive.

GB: It is; I think, incongruous for the poems, though. Obviously, pain is a part of life. So, the poems are just painful. Maybe it is a book about you, about surviving. You are a survivor. There's a picture on the front and a picture on the back, and then what's in the middle is what happened in the middle. So, alive again, after the fact comment about this picture on the back, [Jonatha's photo for Love Alone. What made you choose it?]

PM: I went with Michael who said, "What's wrong with doing something sexy?" I said, "There's nothing. Go ahead. Go ahead. Shred." And probably not an incident given the significance of a natural photograph, that's what we went with on Borrowed Time as well.

GB: When is this picture from?
PM: I think that picture would have been taken sometime around November, 1984, a few months before Roger got sick—taken by a client of Roger's and somewhat of our friends, Steve Hamby. He had a Christmas party which we went to, and he had photographs of all his friends as their Christmas present, and that was ours. And we were both delighted by it. And by Christmas, Roger really wasn't well. AIDS just overtook our lives at that point.

GB: So with this Steve Hamby picture, it was just obviously appropriate to have Roger's picture on Borrowed Time. And you weren't necessarily needing to be conscious of your image.
PM: It's a wonderful picture of Roger and a less wonderful picture of me, but I didn't care. Because it was hard to capture his wonderess.

GB: Yes, but you're very boyish looking in that. How old were you there?
PM: Oh, I was surely thirty-eight or so.

GB: How about other author's pictures that you have seen? Is there anything about author's pictures that you have thinking about?
PM: I often think they're terribly self-conscious and self-indulgent at the same time. I'm also very aware because there are different kinds. Author's pictures from the world of best sellers are much more nakedly commercial. I'll give you an example...often with authors, you get that most picture of the day also. I had equal problems with Irving Penn, frankly, and in a way with Robert Mapplethorpe, and so. It seems to me there was a kind of compulsion that was at odds with another sort of thing they were doing. I don't feel that way about any of them any more.

GB: If you could have had anyone photograph you—even if we say in 1978, in 1982—whatever years they may have been throughout time, living, dead—portrait photographers. We're dealing now with just painters, portrait artists. Who might you have chosen?
PM: Oh, a couple of things come to mind. Certauly Steichen comes to mind—because I just think they are such exquisite portraits, the ones he did for Vanity Fair, not the Hollywood ones. And if I really wanted to do a good romantic picture of myself, I could do worse than someone like Julia Margaret Cameron. But I would not be afraid in these days of my life to be photographed by a Dine Arbus. Because I think what moves me about her work is how terribly human it is, and how terribly unexploitative it is. I wouldn't mind seeing what Avedon would say about me. It's so fascinating to me to imagine a portrait of someone like Oliver Stone. I also think I've probably grown in appreciation of him. And I think he's probably grown as a figure of photography. Who else would I choose?

GB: Mapplethorpe?
PM: I wouldn't be against it. No, I was trying to think...I think I want to choose somebody like Dorothy Lange or Walker Evans—people who I worship. But they are not actually portrait-raper and subject. I think that's the last picture she took of me.

GB: You, really do look comfortable with the way this picture—almost as if you're smiling at the photographer. It's almost like we're there at a moment. It feels like a moment, less internal than it is shared.

PM: Very open, somehow, unlike that thing of me crossing my arms in Toos.

GB: The older we get the more of life there is to live, isn't there?
PM: Yeah, and big goodbye to—

GB: Halfway Home. Look at that! This is by Tom Bianchi, art directed on the slant on the back flap. And who is he?

Tom Bianchi, interior photo from Halfway Home, 1991
PM: You can say I was looking at him, because that's exactly true. He's a photographer who has done, or four books of erotic male photography, not very much to my taste, but he's very skilled, and then I see some wonderful pictures. Michael Demeny, who publishes him, put us together. Oh, they picked a wonderful picture.

GB: So, is a Halfway Home the last book before Becoming A Man?

PM: Right. And Halfway Home is a happy book about being in love. And the main reason I'm really proud of it, and I was very glad that that picture showed me happy and being in love.

GB: [shows small B&W head-shot of PM on cover of Becoming A Man with fist on check] Everyone knows this picture on the cover.

PM: It's by a woman photographer named Tracy Litt, who's a lesbian photographer. I think it's the first picture she's ever published outside a small, local, lesbian newspaper. It was quite wonderful. I just happen to really like this picture that she took. I saw it in a beatnik bookstore, and I was just thrilled.

GB: Yeah. It really is such a wonderful picture, and it's how we became friends. Because this book had just come out when we saw you at the Sammler Gallery, and Martha recognized you because of that picture.

PM: Tracy lives in New York. They actually chose another photograph from that group for my book of poems, which just came out.

GB: What was the context of this sitting? Because that's the same shirt I photographed you in.

PM: They actually were taken during a publicity tour, and I was getting my picture taken quite a lot, yet I was so comfortable with myself at that time. Winstone and I were together on the Becoming A Man tour, the spring of '92, which was when this happened. And I felt more free, in myself, in my garments, than I had, partly because I had told the story of it. I felt triumphant in talking about it. I had a real message I wanted to deliver to people, about not to go to that way in life, but to go with openness. Those pictures capture what really the picture and my communciation of it, I am much less concerned with how I look, in myself, anyway.

And there is porcellating in me a level of aloneness towards others, and I suppose, a conscious attempt to take the role of model. Somehow, all of these pictures are part of that pictures show. I mean, it's not an accident that they are the pictures from Becoming A Man, and that book tells my story as clearly as it could. And I also have a sense that if someone were following me around with a camera, the way my documentarians have been doing for the last couple of years, that any snap of me taken off side, would look like this during that year of Becoming A Man. It was really a time of great triumph for me.

PM: '91. Yeah, because I was diagnosed [with AIDS] in December of '92. [asks Winston] I don't think so.

GB: You've been diagnosed for less than two years?

PM: No, I'm coming up on three years in December. That diagnosis happened, and the reaction to that drug almost killed me happened six weeks after the National Book Award, and three weeks after the Today Show, right... New Year's '91 when I was diagnosed.

GB: So, other people photographed you, but did you not see the pictures, or you just didn't like them as well as this?

PM: Oh, it's funny, because even though I thought we might want to use that picture for the poems, but I think they decided it might tip the seriousness of it, or something. I'm glad they went with what they did. They did a beautiful job on the book.

GB: We have to deal with it—Last Watch of the Night, the only book we have left.

PM: I was a little afraid of how this photo would affect me because as soon as I saw it, I knew it was right. But I also knew—the first thing I thought was—I'm sick. And quickly, I began to understand that there was depth, and experience, and even a kind of wisdom in the directness, and in the honesty of it. It's hard in a way for me to separate my pleasure at the rights of it from my pleasure at the rightness of the choice of Greek sculpture on the covers. They both seem set in stone in a way.

If there is any significance theme in Last Watch of the Night, it is that even in the midst of dying, one must live. The necessity of examining one's life is only more acute in the Ayurvedic sense. And the command was to see the Temple at Delphi, "Know thyself," went with me from beginning to end of this book. It did not make me proudest of the photographs that it's a picture of someone who knows himself.

Most of the seven months since you took that picture, I've been quite ill. And I don't much like the way I know myself anymore. So, in a way this is something to hold on to, because I can't seem to write with the same kind of acumen, and I can't seem to get past all of my symptoms.

Greek tragedy includes tragic knowledge. I prefer a kind of more grasped-for knowledge, in a way. There is so little in my consciousness these days that has any joy or any sense of discovery. I mean, obviously, enduring is a full-time job. I don't know where this doves tail with putting oneself out as a writer both in an author photography or as a book, versus a sense of being paralyzed to know how to put myself out these days. I've said to Winston, I really have to be better than this, I cannot go on like this, because it is just twenty-four hour misery and self-consciousness. All fight and on the struggle to preserve some kind of essential self, especially if you're me, especially if you've spent so much time examining the self.

When I went in the hospital and had these three bone cancers, with chemo, and picked up an infection from the hospital which they couldn't cure for three, and a half months—a coccus infection. I mean, really the whole year before this [GB's photo] I was in very good shape, right? [To Winston] Remember that picture we took for the visas into Russia? I look like I'm a dead body. I don't even look alive.

GB: But the self, regardless of how it might be physically pictured, the self is very strong...It's almost as if because of the portrait, you're trying to overcome your life struggle. This is the life and-death struggle that you're living through, but this other was the life struggle.

PM: There is something so poignant in a way about every one of these photographs, because of how little the subject understands what's going on in his own life. A few years down the line, or ten years down the line, you like all those pictures in the tower in the Holo campus Museum from that one town in Lithuania. Thousands of pictures of people who just don't know what's about to happen. We never do.

GB: You know, you can paint a portrait obviously after death, after you're dead...It's just a photograph, you don't know what's happened to it.

PM: You know, that wonderful picture by Duane Michaels of the man and woman on the bed sitting, and what's been underneath it is. We were happy then. We were so happy. You could see it, I love that picture. And clearly, they're not now—much has happened.

I've had more of it in place than most people do—in terms of the anchoring of my relationship, and my house, and my doggies, and my work. I mean there is something to fight for, for thirty-one. They didn't even have a chance when she died, of AIDS who never really found love in life. Really love in a way missed them and they knew it. And the struggle just became quickly abstracted.

GB: I have a friend in Houston whose 30-year-old son was just killed in an automobile accident. He didn't have to struggle with it—death was instantaneous. But with this I had this sense of completion that none of us know how long life is supposed to be. And when you talk about how your life has been full, and some of those friends' lives who died of AIDS must be a struggle that they should be dead. But they could have lived to eighty—

PM—and still not had it. I'm so glad I had a chance to live in my forties all these years, because it's so different and so wonderful. And there is so much more still available to me. And that's why it pains me when people have to die at twenty-six and thirty-one. They didn't even have a chance to see how very much love can matter. I remember this old French lady told me once, she said, "I hope you get to be as successful as you want to be, and you are a wonderful writer. But I promise you, if you get to be fifty, eat that bread and spend most of your time in the past." And she may have been saying this more about herself than about me. But she's right. You spend an awful lot of time in the past, trying not to be sad, trying just to be there.

I always say about Oedipus, if the Oracle at Delphi told you or the Sphinx told you you're going to kill your father and marry your mother, you ought to be very careful who you kill and who you marry. And he's not. He kills the king, because he gets praised off of him on the road, because he's filling up the road. And he goes to Thebes and he marries this woman whom he doesn't know. Greek tragedy is not about people who are cautious because of what they know about love and life.

[PM walks out the door of the room.] OK, I think I should lie down for a half hour. I have all this medical stuff to do.

GB: I think you should, too. I want to kiss you good-bye—for today...
The Art Guys Think Twice at the Contemporary Arts Museum, April 8-June 25, 1995

William R. Thompson

On October 18, 1963, Julian Wasser photographed Marcel Duchamp playing a game of chess with a modest-yet
woman inside a gallery of the Pasadena Art Museum. A memorable footnote in the history of contemporary art, Wasser's photos of middle class life as a vivid reminder of photography's historical importance to performance and conceptual art. For years, avant-garde artists whose work was temporary or ephemeral in nature often turned to photography to record and frame their actions. Others, such as Duchamp, staged events and performances exclusively for the camera or took advantage of the device's unique ability to capture a fleeting moment and manipulate one's perception of reality. Many of these documentary images—sometimes the only surviving evidence of a finished conceptual piece or performance—have since become valued as art objects in their own right, challenging traditional definitions of art and further blurring the distinction between concept and finished product. Given its significance to the work of conceptual and performance artists, it is hardly surprising that photography has also been essential to the art of Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth—the collaborative pair of post-modernists better known to Houston audiences as the Art Guys. Their frequent use of the camera as both a documentary tool and expressive medium was evident throughout "The Art Guys: Think Twice," a retrospective featuring more than eighty works and twelve years of their creative efforts held at the Contemporary Arts Museum this past summer.

Although the Art Guys could not begin their working partnership until adulthood, their unique artistic philosophies were formed together. Both artists emerged in the same community, in the same high school, in the same middle class home. In addition, they almost have the same birthday: Massing was born on January 4, 1959 in Buffalo, New York, whereas Galbreth was born on January 6, 1956 in Philadelphia. Following their similar, yet remarkably independent paths, the two men eventually made their separate ways to Houston and in the spring of 1982 met at the University of Houston's Lawndale Art and Performance Center. In 1983, Massing and Galbreth first performed The Art Guys Agree on Painting, a now-famous stunt in which they dipped their right hands into buckets of paint and then shook hands over a piece of paper; the action produced a "drip painting" reminiscent of the work of Jackson Pollock, but more important, the seeds for a whimsical and dynamic collaboration were sown. In the following year, Galbreth earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from UH, and Massing, following the advise of sculptor James Suris, completed his undergraduate work there. Since then the two men have shared their respectiveidentities as independent artists and worked together under the anonymous rubric of the Art Guys. Art curator Lynn Herbert suggested in the exhibition catalogue, however, their collaboration may have predated their interest in "performance" by as many as ten years. On each of their respective birthdays in 1960—just 48 hours apart—the parents of Massing and Galbreth photographed their sons wearing holster and toy guns. "For any other two adults, such a discovery would be dismissed as mere happenstance. The Art Guys, however, elect to ponder the possibility of these photographs representing the first "Art Guys" work," Herbert wrote. While playing cowboy was a typical custom for middle class boys in 1960s America, the two photographs of Massing and Galbreth wielding public toy pistols foreshadowed their collaborative exploration of other boyish customs and perhaps even their decision to dwell in Texas, the stereotypical heart of the gun-toting Old West. That the Art Guys would consider two old-fashioned symbols as evidence of their first project reveals just how much they esteem the accidental and ephemeral aspects of making art. Indeed, a number of the works included in "Think Twice" were made from photographs resembling amateur snapshots taken by the artists or witnesses to their performances. Although in the course of performance art, the action is usually considered the finished work, Massing and Galbreth have sometimes exhibited their documentary photographs along with the physical objects and performances in order to create new works of art. In Product Test #1: Situette Toilet, Houston to San Antonio, Highway 103, 234.7 Miles, 1987, for example, the Art Guys attached a red suitcase to the bumper of a pick-up truck and dragged it on the road in order to test, not unlike obsessive consumer product inspectors, its durability. Originally intended for an exhibition at the Blue Star Art Space in San Antonio, the scarred suitcase was installed in "Think Twice" alongside a commemorative brass plaque and a Type C print, showing the performance in progress. Photography has not only proven to be an effective method of documenting such projects, but has enabled the Art Guys to envision through such work. Jack Massing, age 1, birthday snapshot, January 4, 1960. Tomramark, N. Y.

Michael Galbreth, age 4, birthday snapshot, January 6, 1960. Asheville, North Carolina

placed their proposed proscenium in a more serious art historical context by juxtaposing their sketches cut from magazines showing a venerable presidential nose from Mount Rushmore and a medieval head missing its nose. Unlike the Art Guys' imagined Situette Toilet, this project was realized for the exhibition in The Big Picture: 1995, an enormous wall-mounted nose which periodically erupted, as the title implied, and spewed forth green azaleas into a fake basin on the floor. The work was an appropriate testament to the Art Guys' technical ingenuity as well as to their childhood attraction to disgusting things. Yes, in the world of the Art Guys even boogers can be art.

The ability of the camera to record a specific moment in time proved useful in Bulk Up for CAM, 1994-95, a yearlong project combining photography, body art, and performance. In this work the Art Guys embarked on an ambitious regimen of dieting and exercise to strengthen and tone their bodies. Before beginning their work-out routines, however, Massing and Galbreth photographed their bodies separately in poses emphasizing the apparent fatlessness of their bodies. In these two small gelatin silver prints the artists proudly display their lean bodies, soft abdomens, droopy eyelids, and messy hair. In short, both looked exactly as though they could barely get out of bed that morning, much less lift a dumbbell. These images were juxtaposed next to two monumental photographs of Massing and Galbreth taking a walk around a city park as a routine exercise. In these images the Art Guys, clad only in Speedos, short pants and t-shirts, as they show off their bulging biceps and sculpted pecs. The year of exercise not only improved their bodies but also sharpened their minds as well—gone were the dimwitted facial expressions and unkeep appearances of their former selves. The juxtaposition of these two sets of photographs on the museum wall parodied the "before and after" images from advertisements showing satisfied individuals espousing the benefits of various techniques as collage and montage, proposals that they themselves were able to carry out. In Situette Toilet Maquette, 1995, another example of their fascination with language, the Art Guys created a microscopic scale model of a circular tower composed entirely of situette. Although a life-size version has not been constructed, the exhibition catalogue proved to be the ideal venue for reproducing a clever photographic montage showing Massing and Galbreth trapped in the center of the tower maquette.

In another outlandish proposal titled The Big Chair: Saze from U.S. of A. of the World's Greatest Sculpture Proposals, 1991, the Art Guys made use of appropriat-ed photographic images glazed to the surface of a chair, a plan for the construction of a monumental mechanical nose. Although the project was intended to be funny, they
The Art Guys: Blow Up for CAM, before and after photographs of a twelve-month body-conditioning project preparing for the survey exhibition at CAM, culminating in an unveiling performance at Labatt, a ladies club in Houston, 1994-95.

Mamilla Paln, 1978, installed on the west lawn of the CAM. In a more daring act, the Art Guys stole a small Michael Tracy sculpture from their Dallas-based art dealer Barry Whistler, enclosed it within a glass vitrine, and labeled it Appropriation #7, Barry Whistler, 1978. 8.5 x 8.5 cm., 1991-94. Incorporated into an Art Guys assemblage, the Tracy sculpture lost its autonomy as an individual work of art; contextualized within a glass case to record, as a John Cage, the musical possibilities of non-musical objects. Interestingly not all of the objects in the box were actually produced by Massing and Galbreth. In Dancing at Denny’s Food for Thought, 1988, an excerpt from a broadcast on television Channel 13’s program Good Morning Houston, local reporters bumpted about the Art Guys’ latest stunt—sitting in a Denny’s restaurant for twenty-four hours in order to comment on the work of other artists and ironically, pondered whether or not such an act was indeed art. It is a question that Massing and Galbreth delighted in provoking in this and other works.

While the camera is obviously an interesting component of the Art Guys’ oeuvre, it does not dominate their creative output. The Art Guys have never favored one particular medium over another, but instead have dabbled in virtually everything from painting to whitening. Hierarchical distinctions between different tools, materials, concepts, and approaches simply do not apply to their work—they have been interested in the creative methodologies and ever-willing to try new things. From time to time they have reached into their seemingly bottomless bag of tricks in order to explore innovative approaches to such established and frequently used techniques as appropriation. Since appropriation, by definition, involves taking something improperly or without permission, the Art Guys apparently could not resist crossing the fine line separating artists’ appropriation and outright theft. Not satisfied with merely appropriating images of works of art, the Art Guys have gone far as to make additions to existing works or by re-contextualizing works by other artists and to incorporate entire works into their own creations. In Gorilla Art, 1995, for example, Massing and Galbreth temporarily attached two monkey topiaries to the palm tree in Mel Chin’s monumental sculpture as Chinatown, the mostly African-American Ward, and the outskirts of posh, overwhelmingly white River Oaks. Although these communities are isolated from one another because of racial, economic, and social barriers, the Art Guys drew attention to their close physical proximity and conceptually linked them through the act of blowing debris from one block to the next using leaf blowers, the Art Guys further collapsed racial stereotypes by placing themselves in the role often associated with Mexican-American laborers who are seen everyday in Houston wielding the devices while tending the yards of affluent residents. Like many of the Art Guys’ projects, however, Blow Through Town also followed in the footsteps of other conceptual artists—particularly Joseph Beuys, Richard Long, and Dennis Oppenheim—who have also practiced walking as a method of making art.

Although “art” and “gays” are two words that do not always mix, Massing and Galbreth seem to have discovered the formula for successfully integrating their jobs as artists with their social roles as men. The unique duality of their collaboration has enabled them to accomplish together what few other artists have been able to do alone. Their work is conceptual, rich and sophisticated enough to satisfy the most jaded theoreticians, yet it is firmly rooted in the populist traditions of middle class America. Throughout their oeuvre the Art Guys have paid homage to Duchamp, Fluxus, Cage, and Klein, but equally as important, they have found rich meaning in such everyday cultural effluvia as baseball, Coca-Cola, and Camel cigarettes. In short, virtually anyone can find meaning in their work. The Art Guys may indeed celebrate innocence, the unconventional, and consumer excess, but like devout postmodernists, they do so in order to question canonical standards and doctrines. Despite their sarcastic antics and slapstick sense of humor—or better yet, because of them—the Art Guys have made some very serious art.
INTERVIEW WITH ANDRES SERRANO

SEPTEMBER 28, 1995

David L. Jacobs

Editor's Note: This interview was conducted in conjunction with the Contemporary Arts Museum retrospective "Andres Serrano: Works 1983-1993," September 30 - November 26, 1995.

DIJ: We should start with Piss Christ, since it’s the cause celebre. Obviously the picture has brought you a lot of notoriety. How has it affected your career, both positively and negatively?

Serrano: Well, it put me in a much greater arena as an artist. I attract an audience that sometimes knows very little about art, but is curious to see my work because they have heard about it. I’m grateful for that. I never wanted to make work that would only appeal to one specific audience—especially an art audience. I prefer to get people from all walks of life and with all kinds of backgrounds to come to see the work. I get a very diverse audience. That’s something very positive and real that’s happened. And I have made tons of money because of the notoriety—which is fine—but it’s not like living on Easy Street. At this point in my life I struggle—everything is a struggle. An artist never knows, no matter who he or she is, established or not—you never know what kind of income you’re gonna have. It’s not fixed.

DIJ: Warhol’s fifteen minutes of fame—you never know when it’s going to run out.

Serrano: I never know from month to month what kind of income I’m going to draw. I’m in a very privileged position because I’m able to survive off my work, and that’s a very fortunate thing. Many artists have to do something else in order to live. So, in that respect, the controversy has helped me a lot.

DIJ: What about the dome side? Other artists and photographers sometimes get identified with a few images or a signature style, and it’s very difficult to break out into different kinds of approaches, genres, subjects. Has the fame of Piss Christ become a barrier?

Serrano: Not for me or for the audience. Initially, people come because they’ve heard of Piss Christ. There’s a lot of people who know of Piss Christ but they don’t necessarily know my work, and when they come to a show like this they are able to see a greater range. I’ve never felt like a “one shot” artist, or locked into Piss Christ. I’ve always maintained a distance from it. And the audience has reacted very strongly to the later works that have come after Piss Christ such as The Klaas, The Nomads, and especially The Morgue series. I think that at this point my reputation for a lot of people isn’t just Piss Christ but what has followed.

DIJ: Does the ongoing controversy over Piss Christ surprise you, or is fact that ten years later it remains in the minds of people who want to eliminate the NEA?

Serrano: You know, the controversy when it first broke out surprised and shocked me. But, after I saw the way things were going, I realized that the Piss Christ controversy, and the way it was handled, was a real turning point which had nothing to do with me. It had a life of its own and which would go on even without my participation in it. Initially, it was just “Well, it’s going away, it’s going away.” And then something would happen to bring it back again—Jesus Christ wouldn’t let it go, especially during re-election time. Now, years later, Newt Gingrich is talking up Jesus’s mantle. So, it is something that is not a part of my life at this point. When I hear Piss Christ being brought up again, I feel somewhat removed from it.

DIJ: But, of course, it happened again in 1994, when the National Council rescinded a grant that was recommended by the NEA Peer Panel. Were you surprised last year too, or at that point were you expecting controversy?

Serrano: I was surprised that the NEA panel recommended me, and not quite as surprised when the National Council voted to deny me the grant. There were lawyers from different organizations who wanted to pursue it. But the NEA has not been really an active part of my life, so, I didn’t care to pursue it any further in the legal system.

DIJ: What was the Council’s rationale for the reversal?

Serrano: It was a matter of quality.

DIJ: Whose work was presented?

Serrano: The portraits. I really felt like a scapegoat because even though they denied it it was for political reasons, I was sure if any other artist had submitted that work it would not have received the same sort of scrutiny. And the Council was willing to say that my work was going to come up before-hand, and they had gotten slides of work that had to do with my original application to review when my name came up.

DIJ: When going through your retrospective, I couldn’t help wondering what all the fuss was about. The images don’t seem especially tough.

Serrano: In fact, my work is not all that tough. I wish it were tougher. A lot of times people come to see the shows and they wonder what all the fuss is about.

DIJ: Maybe if Piss Christ was a painting, rendered in acrylics...

Serrano: Yeah, if Piss Christ were a painting, and if Piss Christ had not been titled Piss Christ.

DIJ: Maybe Gatorade Chris. To what degree do these issues revolve around the representational status of the photographic image? The fear that there was a real thing being photographed?

Serrano: Absolutely. A real thing—even when it’s an absolute lie. Even when it’s slightly fabricated—like when I do it (e.g., Peter Wirkin or Cindy Sherman)—it seems real to the audience. It’s hard not to respond in a more visceral way than you would with a painting.

DIJ: The photographs are beautiful on a formal level. But isn’t there a problem with what Songz called "The Beauty Treatment" when it is applied to the grotesque or the appalling? I think, for example, of the photographs of the My Lai Massacre that appeared on the cover of Life magazine in 1968: a beautiful colored photograph, elegantly composed of mangled bodies. Given the subject matter, do some of your photographs risk being overly aestheticized? Do the formal elements diminish the subject matter, the content?

Serrano: No, they’re not overly aestheticized. It amazes me that people call me such a perfectionist when it comes to lighting and that my technique is so aestheticized—in reality my lights are very, very simple. It’s not like I went into The Morgue, it’s not like I took these people from the morgue and took them into a fancy, super-duper studio with $50,000 lights like Annie Leibovitz.

DIJ: Well, you don’t need fancy lighting for them to be aestheticized.

Serrano: They’re not fashion shots, they’re not beauty shots—they’re art, and I try to light it well and I try to do a good job. They’re not overly aestheticized at all. It’s just that some people feel uncomfortable because they’re not the sort of morgue shots that you would see in a book of forensic pathology or the My Lai picture or Eddie Adams’ shot of the execution. That’s another approach to death, and there are others. Mine is one of many.

DIJ: Your approach tends heavily toward the abstract, both in the formal sense, and in that you’re abstractionist parts from larger wholes. Buried to Death II is a tightly selected slice (pardon the expression) from the whole. The effect, at least to my eyes, is one abstraction that we aestheticization of the subject.

Serrano: [Look, I don’t know what you expect.] In the morgue series, I initially was photographing people from a greater distance so that you could, if you like, not see three-quarters or half the body. Then I started to zero in on my subjects, realizing that sometimes you could tell more about the whole from a detail. I did with The Morgue what I often do with a lot of my subjects—monumentalize them, make them bigger than life, even more than in The Klan images. I’m also looking at composition. I’m looking for abstraction and representation in my composition. Yes, you
Serrano: I’d say you would have to figure out what part of the body that this is. But, it’s true. I don’t want to make art that needs a text. I have the titles. That’s enough information. You don’t need to know, necessarily, that The Nomads, the homeless portraits that I took, were inspired by Edward Curtis’s photographs of Native Americans.... So, that’s why most of the images in The Morgue are not like Burnt to Death III. This is very atypical. In most of them it is very easy to establish what they are. For me, this is an abstract image. Abstraction is one of the tools of, if not photography, certainly painting and art, and I have always referred to myself as an artist rather than a photographer. So, besides my interest in representation, I have also always been interested in abstraction. So this piece for me may function purely as abstraction.

DLJ: What is true of much of your work?

Serrano: To an extent.

DLJ: The same dynamic is at work in an image like this as Death by Drowning 2. I’m very drawn to this image because of the ambiguity in it—it becomes so many different things to me.

Serrano: Not only that—a lot of times, people don’t know what they’re looking at, not because they’re ignorant but because the camera lies. If I were to ask you, you would probably say this was a black man. This was not a black man. This was a white man who drowned. And, as a result of being in the water for several days, his skin started to turn blue, and green and blue. But, that sort of information is not in the photograph. I mean to tell you. But, it’s not important. You can appreciate it as a human being, black or white.

DLJ: American culture is such a bizarre conglomerate of taboos and violence: the odd dance of eros and thanatos. You give me the biggest headache if you do a Pisan Christ or if you try to represent sexuality on a television screen, and yet the most egregious forms of violence are routinely seen in the media.

Serrano: I just find that this society is a lot more prudish about things like sex and death than Europe. I found that my work has been appreciated in Europe and seen in a different light than here. All you have to do is watch TV and you see naked women, you see breasts, you see a greater acceptance of the body than in the States. I have had many shows of The Morgue in France, Italy, and most recently in Scotland, in Montreal. And, yes, “The Morgue” has been seen in its entirety only once in the U.S., at the Paula Cooper Gallery. And, I know in that when I was a kid growing up, the only images that I ever saw of Native Americans were on TV, and they were seen as savages that had to be completely exterminated for their own good and for the good of the White Man. I infinitely prefer to see Curtis’s vision rather than that one.

DLJ: But, isn’t there an element of ethics that is problematic with what Curtis did with the Indians and perhaps what you are doing with some of your subjects? Issues of human appropriation, of using people toward questionable ends?

Serrano: That’s the nature of photography—it’s all manipulation. Even the photojournalistic manipulates and controls what he photograph. And, in the end, it’s he or she edits.

DLJ: True, there are degrees of manipulation. But some photographers are more manipulative than others.

Serrano: Curtis made his sitters look good, and what’s wrong with that?

DLJ: That’s what you’re doing with the homeless?

Serrano: Exactly.

DLJ: So, I come off the street, kind of like I come in and look at some of The Morgue series, and what do you want me to think from those pictures of The Nomads?

Serrano: I would like for people to respond, hopefully in a positive way. But mostly, to just respond. That’s always been my intent—to not only get the audience in there, but to get the audience to react. The reaction is entirely up to them...

David L. Jacques is chair of the University of Houston Art Department. He co-authored "Ralph Eugene Meatyard: An American Visionary," and contributed to its catalog.
IMAGINED NOSTALGIA IN A
Gothic Arcadia

Martinez Lopez, In View of the Heart, 1995, original in color

The notion of accessibility to the general public by making her images appear as if they were hand-colored and using familiar album photographs. Interestingly, collaging snapshots and photographic portraits and then applying color has been a popular technique that many have enjoyed since the nineteenth century as evidenced by the work of Lady Lilford in the 1860s. In this sense it must be seen as purposeful for Lopez's work to sometimes appear to look "cut out." In Promising the Past, 1995 the figures are more like outlines than contour lines. Images cut on contour lines would enable the task with experience, serial business and skill at a bit of the kitche and familiar.

FOOTNOTES
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
9. Johnson Bowles is an artist and director of the Maineline Galleries at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame. (Continued...)

Martinez Lopez, In View of the Heart, 1995, original in color
Robert D’Attilio

Art and politics swirled through the life of Tina Modotti in oppo-
site directions. She started out as an actress and a photographer; but she ended in the domain of politics, a dedicated Communist and Soviet agent. During the década trágica, she worked within the field of photography (1923-1930), Modotti united these often quarrelsome forces to create an exceptional body of work that has never been quite fully appreciated, that is always in danger of being over-shadowed by the spectacular drama of her life.

As the 100th year of her birth approaches, The Philadelphia Museum, under the curatorship of Sarah Lowe, has mounted a major retrospective of Modotti’s photographs. Containing more than one-half of Modotti’s total output, it is by far the most comprehensive exhibit of her work that has ever been assembled and presents a lucid overview of the full range of Modotti’s work.

Modotti, long considered in America as a minor and exotic addendum to the history of photography, has sprung up from her semi-obscure origins to become a captivating figure. As little as ten years ago, scarcely any accurate information was available about Modotti, but since then she has been overwhelmed with a mainstream, multi-lingual flood of publications dealing with her life and work. Five biographies, two novels (one bestseller), more than a half-dozen exhibition catalogs and conference proceedings, countless magazine and newspaper articles appear in English, German, Italian, Spanish. Much of this attention was at the expense of actual work; the only major retrospective of Modotti’s photography, Modotti became, in Lowe’s paradoxical phrase, “the best known unknown photographer,” this exhibit will help to counterbalance the drama of her life with the weight of her work.

1. SOCIAL DOCUMENTS

Some cynical scholar once said that we look at the past not with our eyes but with our prejudices. It wouldn’t surprise him that Modotti’s work has been plagued by a powerful double whammy: the prejudices of the art world and the prejudices of politics.

Modotti’s photographs first found their way into significant photographic collections, MoMA and George Eastman House, because of personal associations. The prints came as gifts from Edward Weston and his family (Modotti, as is well known, had been his model, mistress, apprentice, colleague, friend); the curator, in each instance, was Beaumont Newhall. Weston’s support was essential and constant. As a result the vague sense emerged within the photographic community that Modotti was a derivative photographer, admired because of whom she knew and not on the basis of her own vision. This led for some time to an under valuation of and condescension toward her work.

Modotti’s own politics further complicated matters. Her work, aided by her influential connections to the cultural left, was originally accepted with enthusiasm in America. She received notice in leading cultural journals; she was the first photographer to appear on the cover of the political radically New Masses; and she participated in several influential photo exhibitions. Eventually, the depth and seriousness of her involvement as a militant communist turned her into an awkward figure to deal with in the United States (She had been a leading figure in such anti-American organizations as Memoria de Nicaragua and Liga antimperialista de las Americas). Dee Kopp told Sara Lowe that in the late 1940’s, while working in the photography department of MoMA, Dee Kopp told Sarah Lowe that she abandoned her research on Modotti after being warned that the political content of the work would draw unwelcome attention in the current anti-communist climate. Moreover according to Kopp, the fear of McCarthyism became so pervasive that when twenty-eight Modotti prints (of the thirty-four that MoMA has) were handed to the front deskarrivée and anonymously in the late 1950s in order to avoid problems and overshadowed only six years later.

Modotti’s controversial politics caused much American photographic criticism and curators to push the subject clumsily aside. Many times they were usually quite inept in considering the reality of her politics; the general slipshod sense being that Modotti’s politics somehow interfered with her artistry. But, to impose art history alone upon Modotti’s photography leads to evident distortions; important historical and social aspects are carelessly dismissed or considered insignificant. Complicating examples can be easily found in major photographic sources.

John Szarkowski in his influential Looking at Photography (he picked one of Modotti’s several images to be included in his choice of 100 significant photographs from the MoMA collection) could bunt about Modotti in aestheticless fashion:

“Most of Tina Modotti’s work that is known to the photography world was done in Mexico in the years 1923 through 1926 when she lived and worked with Edward Weston.

She apparently continued to work after 1926, at least until 1930, when she was deported for Communist activity... Although it is doubtful that any extended consideration of the issue at hand, Modotti was surely one of the most fascinating women of her time, even without reference to her talent as an artist. She was...a sometime revolutionary (dry denunciation of circumstance, or both)...Kenneth Rexroth identified her as a Kollontai type, and was terrified...

The curators of the major traveling exhibition, “Cubist and American Photography, 1910-1930 (1981/82) were prescient enough to see the substantial work, but in their catalog they confined Modotti to the political context of a different generation:

“She was a bright, hardworking student, although her work was often derivative of her teacher’s/ite... Weston...Modotti who, issue a Guatemalan after Weston left Mexico, was arguably closed to the everyday life of the people. Modotti’s photographic style awakened after Weston’s departure and her turned toward radical realism.”

The Italian writer Maria Caronia read a political motive into the rediscovery of the legend of Tina and Edward, casting Weston as a neurotic aesthete, who had destroyed Modotti from finding her way as a political artist and communist militant: “ Weston... above all his visceral American anti-communism that clearly created an insurmountable barrier in his relations with Tina.” Weston as a proto-MacPherson’s lover is just a bit far fetched.

More recently, the noted Weston scholar Amy Conger has struck an oddly reassuring, sanitized tone about Modotti’s politics: Modotti “possibly... even felt an affinity for some of the techniques, which could be seen as consistent with her later association with the Communist Party."

“Lastly, I believe that the skeletal simplicity and morbidity of Weston’s photographs of her as well as his references to her in his diaries have made Tina exceptionally relevant today instead of being another exotic and old-fashioned leftist.”

Can one truly appreciate a political artist while belittling her politics so off-handedly? Finally, the politics of money—one would have imagined that money was the least likely of all things to revive interest in Modotti. In 1991 (1991), one of Modotti’s images (Roses, 1924) fetched the extraordinary price, $165,000, at auction as an unscratched, unframed photograph of the image and especially for one by a relatively unknown photographer. Following suit, the value of all the other prints have skyrocketed. Several have sold for more than $30,000. This simple knock has not only entered into the public eye but right into the top of the art market. Could one
doubt that a major museum retrospec-
tive was in the offering. Eagerly followed by scandal and Modotti's photographs have followed this rule. Upon Modotti's death the prints and nega-
tives that she had kept with her passed into the hands of her companion di
vita, Vittorio Vitali. Upon her death (1983), Vitali intended to offer them as a gift in her memory to the people of Mexico. Instead, they have ended in the hands of Vittorio Vitali's son, Carlos, who in the process of selling them off one by one at enor-
mous prices. It is one of the bitter ironies of history that the prints are now being sold for personal gain by the son of her companion for the revue set out to do. Tragedy of that with a Regiment' had been put on the back of the Modotti prints that were in the possession of Vitali. Many of them are now a mighty econo-
tie problem, expensive frames. How emblematic indeed! Although Modotti always fought against the repressive role that wealth played in society and always rejected the idea of art as conspicuous consumption for the rich, her work has now become a valuable commodi-
ty, held captive to money.
With the end of the Cold War, Modotti's deeply countercultural prints no longer make her too vexatious a figure, so we can begin to look at her work more 'passionately,' and as passionately as we can see Modotti's prints through the massive curves of dollar signs.

II. CURVES OF BEAUTY

Organization of the producing class against the dominant class invariably produces conflict. Out of this struggle comes more or less internal rhythms of emotion, tracing out the curves of beauty implicit in the asc of joy and joy of the fight, the natural results of the tus-
le as a social tool for producing a new society. —translation by Tina Modotti of the words of Xavier Guerrero, May 1927

I consider myself a photographer, noth-
ing more. If my photographs differ from that which is usually done in this field, it is precisely because I try to pro-
duce art not art for art's sake but photographs, without distortions or manipulations.

Tina Modotti, 1929

What should a Modotti retrospective
expect to achieve? To show the produc-
tion of a woman whose work is deeply in-
fluenced by the political and social condi-
tions of the time. This retrospective exhibits 130 prints—slightly more than half her production. In大事的
Sinfonia has done exemplary work in tracking them down throughout the world. She has turned up little known photogra-
phs in such unlikely places as Canada, Australia, while, closer to home, in Mexico and the United States, she has brought to light many a strong print that had languished relatively unemphasized. This choice to view so much of her work may not be soon repeated. In the exhibit Lowe has chosen to present Modotti's prints grouped by

subject matter—flowers, architectural images, abstracts, workers, portraits, folk art, the women of Tehuantepec, puppets, Germany. Inasmuch as Modotti usually fixed her interest mostly on one subject at a time, the concept works remarkably well. Yet several reservations about the Phila-
delphia show should be men-
tioned. One wishes more attention had been paid to the installation for such a major exhibition. In a sense, the straightforward 'mod-
ernist' manner of hanging that Modotti (and Weston) favored—frames of the same style and size—would have been more appro-
priate than the rather dis-
cting miscellany that stands out at the viewer from the walls of the Philadelphia Museum. There are a few unhappy examples where the installation seems dictated more by the frames than by the images. An especially elaborate frame that surrounds the portrait of actress Dolores Del Rio overwhelms everything in its vicinity.

In the catalog accompanying the exhibition Lowe's research brings us the first accurate record of dates, states, medium, locations concerning Modotti's work, all of which, previously, had been woe-
fully inadequate. The catalog, fully researched and meticulously docu-
mented, promises to become the indispensable reference work about Modotti's work. Regrettably, in such a thorough work, a listing of Modotti's major exhibitions is not included (and included are photographs of the Philadelphia Museum).

As a visual record of Modotti's work, however, the catalog dis-
appoints greatly. It is painful to see such a mediocre result for a photographer who was always committed to high technical standards in her work.

Tina Modotti, Aldea, Tehuantepec, 1928

Instead of being simply useful by

printing as many photographs as size

possible, the layout designer has gone into his balancing act, reducing, enlarging, cropping, and cropping again. The poorly reproduced plates bear no relation to the warm sensitive tones of the original. Without getting into a

Steglianz fury about the impossi-

bility of reprinting photographs, Modotti deserved far much better.

But how such ravages falls away when one looks at the show. How strikingly beautiful Modotti's prints are—especially in comparison to those we knew only through reproduction! Whether they attract by their luscious formalism, their documentary intent, or their political purpose, all never fail to provide visual pleasure. What an impeccable eye, what an irreplace-

able sense for form and beauty!

Modotti seems to have learnt full-
grown from Weston's dark room into the center of the photographic world; within months of her first instruction, she was printing out one remarkable image after another. What astonishes is the unerring nature of her gift from the onset. Her work shows a thorough mastery of the medium; she has a com-
plete, sure, and unostentatious virtuosity that makes her images stand out against others.

El Matador, the clow like

flower, is a reproduction always seemed a stark image that was too obvious an idea, but the actual print has a gentleness that surprises. Her platinum prints—the material-

notorious Rosas ($165,000); a

shocking series of doors, stairs, telephone wires—are exquisite in their subtle range of tonal values. Her images of glasses, quiet unembittered interiors, always have a grace of design and a delicacy of execution that are her distinctive signature. In such pictures one can see the influence of Diego Rivera's remark that Modotti was more abstract, more cerebral, more intellectual as an artist than Weston.

As much as Modotti enjoyed sensual passions in her life, eroticism never explicitly entered into her work. Nor, despite her own experiences as a model, was she ever attracted to the nude as a subject. Her open completely erotic image, the Calle Lify, 1924 suggests the influence of her friend Images Cunningham—or did it be the other way round? The provoking question of influences upon Modotti's work—and, conversely, her influences upon others—still remains to be fully explored.

The coming of Lowe's eye-catching finds is the remarkable image that Modotti made of crumpled tin foil, 1926. Its modernist abstraction seems as con-
temporary as the day it was made. (There are some mysteries that sur-
round this print. One wonders if tin foil was available in Mexico of that

period? Could it turn out to be one of the few images that Modotti made in the United States?)

Suddenly Modotti's work took a decisive turn midway in her photo-

graphy life; she made her great and astonishing leap—from modernisme to revolutionaire artist. Although Modotti had always moved in political circles in California and Mexico, her work had never contained political content as such. The first political image that she made—the only one she ever made while she was with Weston—remains one of her finest and most popular, the May Day ParadeCam-
enicos, 1926. As always, the success of her eye was amazing.

Soon after Westons departure from Mexico at the end of 1926, Modotti joined the Mexican Communist Party and began, in the company of her new lover and companion Xavier Guerrero, her 'tuscle with art and mighty eco-
nomic problems.' Guerrero, one of the most influential and articulate editors of the Communist Party journal El Maleto was the crucial—and us-
ually amongst the Communist leaders, was led to Modotti to fuse her art and politics. It was while Modotti was with Guerrero that she began to produce some of the most interesting and important work of the chal-
lenge of making political art. She cre-
ated her great series of symbols of the Mexican Revolution; she transformed Bandoleros, guns, corn, hammer and sickle, guitars and sombreros into a revolutionary call to arms. She had discovered her great and natural gift—how to balance political intent and aesthetic impulse within her work.

Tina Modotti, Rosas, 1924

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Photography...takes its place as the most satisfactory medium for registering objective life in all its aspects...I believe that the result is something worthy of a place in social production, to which we should all contribute.

From On Photography by Tina Modotti, 1929

The Mexican Government did indeed pull its strings and deported Tina Modotti from Mexico in 1930. She ended in Berlin where she attempted to continue her work as a photographer. Quick eye that she always had, she began the theory of revolution in the Young Communist Pioneers, 1930 her last well-known political work, but was booted out of Moscow working as a communist functionary. The photographer of altitude and abstraction and maker of political propaganda left the world of art and chosen a life of total political commitment. Her journey through photography is partially finished. We really do not know the reasons for her choices, but we do know that she chose not to return to the work of her choice of her final mentor, Josef Stalin.

The emblematic photographs of Tina Modotti have begun to suffer the fate of all photographers, but their art, explicit messages that Modotti's intended have faded away, what remains are her mastery and thematic. She is still the women with a banner, the beautiful banner of her work. It is no longer the banner she started out with, but nonetheless it can remind us of the compelling synthesis art and politics can create in the ardent and joyous fight against the dominant class.

Robert D'Auria is a native of South Medford, MA and writes about Italian radicalism in America.

FOOTNOTES
2. She received a major notice in the important journal, Omega, during the publication for the first time, the photogra- pher to be featured on the cover of New Woman (issue in all). She was on the American intellectual travelers' must-see list in Mexico City and she was a natural choice as the adwoman of her work, the precocious left-sympathetic leaning Harvard undergraduate Lincoln Kirstein included it in his landmark photo book, The Art.
3. Sarah Levine, p. 143, n. 3. It should be noted that what was earlier considered "mysterious" (i.e., the manner in which the prints were given to Modotti) is now clearly pointed.
5. p. 16. Tina Modotti: Photographs, Maria Corniglia, Idea Editions, Westbury, NY. Corniglia relates the informa- tion or reconstruction with great care and detail, which has no doubt earned her the respect of all who inspired this image.
7. This was told by Laura Winits, Vidal's frequent companion, who, when I visited her in Trieste in 1984, Vidal had died the preceding year. She gave me a lot of material that had just been shiped to Mexico, supposedly for this purpose.
8. Carlos Vidal is Vittorio Vidal's son by Israel Carballo, the woman he married soon after Modotti's death. Carlos came into Modotti's work only by the acci- dent of birth. Despite being a Mexican citizen, he has not felt obligated to pre- serve the identity of his family and the people who inspired its images.
9. The military unit that Modotti and Vidal were attached to during the Spanish Civil War. It seems that Vidal marked the soldiers with the unique geometric pattern in memory of his common struggle.
10. Sarah Low, History of Photography, v. 18, n. 3, Autumn, 1974, p. 285. This detail does not include several hundred or so images that Modotti made for the Mexican muralists of the time (which were never published and are a particularly exciting item). In each exhibit, the core collection offers a representative sample of the retrospective in NAC, has about several hundred images of the period of the Murals, 10 of them were handcolored, possibly by Modotti herself. The art historical world is unanimous to have bought one, in case we can be sure they will attribute the coloring to Modotti. Money does seem to talk in the current state of affairs with Modotti's prints.

Tina Modotti, Mexican Sandstorm with Hammer and Sickle, 1927

Ape, a drama which was, itself, based on revolutionary themes—an indictment of America for its spiritual sick- ness, materialism, and greed. Reunited with a theatrical subject Modotti's vision caught fire. Hands again, but a puppeteer's hands—the hands of a puppeteer and the hands of a string-puller. The puppet symbolism was an obvious comment on society and, per- haps, even Modotti's personal feelings of the moment—being yanked around by the tensions of Mexican politics.

Tina Modotti, Hands of the Puppeteer, 1929

Mexican and Latin American radicals accept her warmly as one of their own and made her symbols theirs. During the several years of this period one wonders what came first in the making of her photographs: the eye or the political situation. But to say that one can tell perhaps not even Tina knew.

Hands have always been a common subject for photographers. Weston had made images of Modotti's hands and Modotti, also, echoing her mentor, took a photo of her mother's hands. Bicycle photograph both of them, but they do not stick in the mind like Modotti's blur image of hands resting on a shovel, 1927. These hands have become a powerful call for social jus- tice. Radical and proletarian as the image may be—it was used for a cover of the American Communist journal, New Masses—Modotti, one should note, also made it as a platinum print. Whatever the nature of her subject Modotti always remembered to offer beauty its due.

Photographs that Modotti shot during the construction of a Mexico City stadium give another example of the remarkable synthesis she achieved during this period (1927). Modotti, under the immediate visual influence of the Mexican muralists—her friends, lovers, conquistadores—has given us two powerful studies of the labor and skill that go into construction work. But during the same time she has made two other equally powerful studies in her best modernist manner. Stadium, 1927 an abstract study of the shadows thrown by the seats of an empty stadium and Stadium Exterior, 1927 an eerie DeChirico-like view of the stadium exterior with construction scaffolding. One can only wonder if they are to be seen in either image. Modotti's heart of hearts may have had its doubts about the constructs of the modern world. She may have felt that all might not be sweetness and light and after the revolution. In this instance, one wishes that the color of the group photographs by subject alone had been relaxed hanging these four images together might have offered a less canonical sense of Modotti's vision.

Unlike many political propagan-
DECONSTRUCTING THE CITY

"Citta Aperta/Open City" Luciano Rigolini at Farish Gallery, School of Architecture, Rice University, September 15 - October 28, 1995

Ed Owsoki

Editor's Note: Rigolini's show will be on view at Rice University's Brown Art and Architecture Library and the Fondren Library during FotoFest.

"I would like to see more clearly, but it seems to me that no one sees more clearly." Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Luciano Rigolini's ten black-and-white photographs of various urban settings, exhibited under the title "Citta Aperta/Open City," are large, challenging, nearly monumental works. Made over a six-year span, from 1990 to 1995, they depict according to their titles, twelve locations ranging from Paris and New York to Houston (1993), to the most recent work in the exhibition, a photograph made in Phoenix in 1995. The locations also serve as the titles of the works.

Rigolini records the banaulities of the post-industrial urban landscape. Concrete freeway ramps and supports, parts of motorized vehicles, steel brises and columns, electric wires crossing the horizon in grid-like patterns repeat from one photograph to another and echo visually across the gallery.

What holds little interest for Rigolini in these photographs is recording what is unique about Kyoto or Houston or Berlin. One would be hand forced to imagine a Chamber of Commerce using any of his works to "sell" that particular city to a potential client. Rigolini seems concerned with much more important issue—providing evidence that the act of seeing has reached a crisis point, that what was once believed to be "evidence" is now part of a more profound realization that the visual landscape is a fictional creation. That these are photographs of cities on three different continents is their least interesting feature. What actually engages the viewer is the belief that recording these works, of deciphering the details, of piecing together their fractured sections. The rigidity of the grid becomes part of Rigolini's ironic methodology.

Consider the photograph New York. Here the individual pieces threaten to crumble before one's eyes. A steel brace, a street lamp, the upper floors of a lofty building—one can see the few items that one can identify with some certainty. The sharp, crisp edge of the roof-line of the building is the single point of stability in the photograph. The photograph itself consists of a number of parts, of quasi-geometric shapes, that dislocate and reconfigure as one attempts to analyze them. Its various parts do less to hold the photograph together than to bring the viewer up against the unflinch- ing self-referential and self-reflective qualities of the image. New York holds one's attention, initially, by its visual representation of the cliches one can scorn- hard as "urban chaos." But this is its most obvi- ous quality. Threatening to collapse before the viewer's eyes, "New York" is much more than a visual metaphor or equivalent. The difficulty one experiences in piecing together its individual parts speaks directly to the naive and sentimental belief that when the camera records is "objective truth."

There is no way of knowing from Rigolini's ten photograph cliches gables one city from another. On one level, Rigolini is attempting to show how the one cities he has photographed are interchangeable, how nothing sep- arates Baltimore from Osaka, how Paris could easily be Houston, how the post-industrial West is everywhere. If one associates Paris with broad boulevards, classical facades, and haute couture, then Rigolini's photographs can only be called perverse. In Paris Baron Hausmann's grand city has been reduced to a median strip. High- parked automobiles and a pedestrian mall. But the principal element in the photograph is a large horizontal band dividing the image into two sections. Above this band all is perfectly clear— the sky, a few roof tops, some trees. Below, perhaps a small structure on a double pane of glass, the scene is blurred—shapes dissolve and factual clarity is lost.

Rigolini's photographs are balanced, carefully composed, and precise in their impression. One notices how in one of the two Houston images a collection of round shapes—the curve of a windshield, a group of oil storage tanks, a large black circle on the window an automobile's rearview mirror—echo one another. This visual rhythm, most paintlessly, holds together an image that would disintegrate without it.

In Rigolini's photographs nothing rests firmly or securely. The main-made-worl—there is little that is "green" or living in his photographs—as if frozen in a house of cards. Freeway ramps angle oddly or threaten to lose their balance (Los Angeles) or they slash across the photograph's surface like Franz Kline's sweeps of black paint (Houston). Peculiar shapes angle from the ground (Phoenix) or block off most of the surface (Berlin). When he pays visual homage to another photographer, as he does in Otsuka, it is to take the precision and clarity of Charles Sheeler's photographs of industrial settings and turn them upside down.

Farish Gallery was an especially appropriate place in which to consider precisely placed objects that cannot be precisely identified, his photographs are about concealing, are about the limits of describing and slowing.

Accompanying the exhibition was a handsome portfolio of the ten images and an essay by Louis Leu, Dean of the School of Architecture at Rice University. In his essay "Beyond Architecture," Leu focused on how architecture has lost what it calls its "symbolic values" and its "capacity to impress." Engagingly Leu's musings addressed Rigolini's photographs when he described contemporary architecture as plagued by "invisibility and a will to homeliness."

Rigolini's photographs are not mere- ly illustrations of a crisis in architect- ure. The critic can explore far beyond the practice of designing build- ings. Rigolini's photographs are at the center of a cultural and aesthetic shift in the practice of photography. The critic is tied to the effort to loosen finally photography's ties to the belief that it somehow possesses some kind of visual "truth." Rigolini's photographs come from a viewpoint in which metaphor and symbol have collapsed. What his photographs show convincingly is that there are no reasons to trust the conventions, the language of photography, the technical apparatus that has tied us to loosen finally photography's ties to the belief that it somehow possesses some kind of visual "truth."

Rigolini's photographs come from a viewpoint in which metaphor and symbol have collapsed. What his photographs show convincingly is that there are no reasons to trust the conventions, the language of photography, the technical apparatus that has tied us to loosen finally photography's ties to the belief that it somehow possesses some kind of visual "truth."

FOOTNOTES

1. The most profound analysis of "modern occa- sionality" is found in Martin Jay's Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Voice in Twentieth Century French Thought. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.) Jay's text bears directly on Rigolini's photographic method as well as that of many of the critics. What Jay defines and what Rigolini's photographs repre- sent is a post-modern way of seeing, one in which certitudes elude the viewer's reach.

2. "Neither or one gains greater weight to technical advances or social changes, it is thus evident that the dawn of the modern era was unaccompanied by the vigorous privileging of vision. From the curious, otherwise scientific examination of the exhibitionist, self-displaying courteses, from the private realm of pinted books to the flood of perspective landscapes, from the stop-making civilizations, the fore- ign lands to the counting businesses guided by instru- mental rationality, modern men and women request and then gather a world unveiled to their eager gaze" (p. 65). The lift- ing of that veil, Rigolini would have us conclude, was a trick.

3. There is no evidence that Rigolini actually photographed in the locations he names. He includes no elements or visual clues to ground such photograph in the city of its title: There are no palm trees in Los Angeles, no deserts in Phoenix, nothing Japanese about the two works made in Japan. That one of the two Houston images contains all storage tanks is no proof that this work "documents" Houston. This photograph results (or dissolves) itself into a consideration of existing urban- ity shapes. So powerful is the tendency of the modern industrial setting to fracture into random, disconnected parts that even pre-industrial cities—Berlin, Paris, New York—show them break into seemingly arbitrary fragments.


5. The author thanks Paul Hester for numerous conversations and comments on the difficulties of photographing and looking at buildings.

Luciano Rigolini, New York, 1990

Luciano Rigolini, Paris, 1990

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Metamorphoses: Photography in the Electronic Age, Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, June 9-July 30, 1995

Eric Davis

As a society we have long lived with Buck Rogers' ideals of the twenty-first century. So long, that we no longer recognize being on the cusp of a new age in which technology will make our lives easier. We are there, Inventions once considered advanced now seem archaic. Steam engines, automobiles, and electricity have given way to the information superhighway, space shuttles, and nuclear power. The computer age has made us so demanding, we find it difficult to wait for the next improvement. We want IT and we want it now. As a result, technology has in a way become its own worst enemy. We need it, but loathe it, as it has become so interlinked with our existent fabric that we can not even die without it. Technology has made our "dreams" come true.

It seems appropriate then that Houston, the home of NASA and Compaq computers, would be a venue for "Metamorphoses: Photography in the Electronic Age." Photography, after all, is an art form invented from technology unlike painting and sculpture that have a prehistoric basis.

The concept of photography is grounded in reality. Since its invention we have looked upon and physically held it as tangential proof of a subject's existence. The photographer has a real subject in front of the camera. The actuality of reality is hard to deny. With digital imagery, however, one has the ability to create a totally fictional reality—a digital reality. Digital photographic subject matter looks real; it is hard to overcome the veracity we have been taught to see in photographs. Yet just as we intuit traditional photographic subjects to be real, we ultimately know digital imagery to be false. Nowhere is this collision of ideas more evident than the work of Pedro Meyer and the collaborative team, MANUAL.

Pedro Meyer has been known primarily for black-and-white documentary images. Meyer, however, has not fully given himself over to the possibilities of digital imagery. He still incorporates images from the real world.

The evenness of Meyer's work in the exhibition, all from 1991-1993, quickly fades. He finds a momentary respite in the slight humor of The Strolling Salesman, but the remaining works fall flat. Meyer is still caught between social commentary and purely aesthetic imagery. In the crossover, his messages become so heavy-handed that the viewer resists being forced fed attempts to raise their consciousness.

Mexican Migrant Workers is intended to be a caustic statement about the collision between the poverty of the workers and the excess of America as found in the hedonism of Las Vegas. It fails, however, as a digital image, because the viewer knows the setting is visually fictional; as a result, the actual plight of the workers is weakened as the image takes on a fictional appearance.

The collaborative efforts of Ed Hill and Suzanne Bloom, known as MANUAL, fully celebrate the possibilities of digital assistance in creating a contemplative blend of aesthetics and social commentary. The techno-landscapes, floating balls, and other oddities found in their work, however, are totally computer generated.

In the exhibition, MANUAL mixes social commentary with elements of fantasy. Although the commentary now seems a standard part of their repertoire, it is not repetitious. They have long been taking visual stands on cultural icons including television, DaVinci's Mona Lisa, and the "landscape." MANUAL makes its point ever so subtly, but very powerfully.

The installation of untitled images from The Constructed Forest best exhibits the clash between the ideals of technology and the natural world.

There are, however, two battles of the titans working here. The more overt of the two is one that humans have waged against nature for centuries. Like technology, we need the "landscape," but often loathe it, and consequently, try to make it ours through various means of improvement. Also, like technology, without the landscape, society could physically die.

Mankind's quest for a better world has consequently pushed it westward. This has subsequently meant the natural world, the tree forest, has had to make room for man's new constructed landscape of homesteads, shopping areas, and other buildings. In MANUAL's work, man is represented in the floating designs in the images. These seemingly utilitarian objects are, theoretically, made from materials taken from the natural world and molded for our use.

The irony of such fabrication is that the objects do not look natural, look real—they appear plastic. They possess the same quality as man's attempt to produce "simulated wood grain" for those who can no longer afford the real thing (economically or ecologically)—one of the things.

The plasticity of these "natural" objects is further complicated by the fact that they are computer generated.

Pedro Meyer, The Temptation of the Angel, 1991, original in color

Meyer has been known to humorously play with the conception of falseness in digital imagery with pint size humans listening to monumental ceramic mannequins or his Claes Oldenburg homage of giant chair on display in a public setting. In "Metamorphoses" he displays a mix of fantasy and social awareness. The Temptation of the Angel is the most successful of Meyer's images in the exhibition. Although most viewers have grown to question spiritual beings, Angel pushes one to believe in the possibility of their physical existence. Digital imagery is temporarily granted a moment of veracity.
They do not exist in our material world.
The production of these objects can be taken a step further if one considers MANUAL's use of framing. The hand-some frames are made of actual wood. They have been hand-hewn. However, it is precisely this contact constructed to meet the artists' conception for presentation and, usually, sale of the work. The notion of the work as a product is enhanced further by the artists' signature, often displayed as a stamped M in a circle, much like the emblem of the van de vort registered trademarks. MANUAL's idea of using a mass-produced product to create mausa, however, is not what one would typically associate with the work of the Dada movement. Surrealism, born from Dadaism, was an attack on the materialistic and industrial society, but some of its themes, such as ceremonial and functional, were more positively charged than its nihilistic parent. The movement tried to reconcile the contradiction of dreams and reality into what Andre Breton, Surrealism's official spokesperson, called a "super-reality." Dada and Surrealism had that the artist use ideas and techniques previously not thought suitable for serious work.
The rise of digital imagery then is the perfect cross of these movements. It is shocking the art world's complacency with the idea that digital photographic values. It deals with the illogical and sometimes absurd. Finally, it fully allows the reconfiguration of dreams and reality into Breton's super-reality—now a digital reality.

Paul Thorel is one of the most successful in accomplishing this task. His images are on the very edge between the two states of mind. Thorel, however, depicts that last gasp of memory between unconscious and the logical state of mind that produces dreams. We have all wished we could capture our dreams on film, Thorel seems to be working toward such realization.

Martina Lopez, not unlike Thorel, is interested in reconstructing memories. Thorel's images are true attempts to accentuate the illogical, sometimes absurd, aspects of unconscious thought. Lopez has been very successful in that area and attempt to revive very specific memories. At the first works appear to be autobiographical, but they seem to be more personal to her work. The existence of billions of photographs of our own family memories helps bring a commonality to Lopez's digitized recollections. This factor is taken further as she now searches junkyard for imagery that carries experience common to her own. She then does find such images with Lopez's Regius visions, being able to cope with the amount of digital assistance necessary to produce her work. The only indication one has that these are not a traditional collage or montage images, is the lack of physical edge normally found in such efforts. The majority of the works in the exhibition owes homage to the montage and collage artists of the early twentieth century. Lopez in particular owes a debt to Joseph Cornell.

As shown in Houston, Osamu James Nakagawa, who holds an MFA from University of Houston, opens the exhibition. Nakagawa finds photography to be the "expressive bridge" between America by birth and culturally Japanese. Caught between the two, he uses this perspective to investigate and present his view of Western society. Using the photography of drive-in movie screens and advertising billboards, he depicts overtly public or political situations juxtaposed against seemingly innocuous scenery.

The social commentary of Nakagawa's imagery is well intended. He wants us to think about the juxtapositions, but they occasionally appear strained. He carefully chooses which billboard or movie screen landscape is the setting for his inset images and they appear appropriately placed in the "natural" landscpe. If a subtext of these images, however, is the encroachment of humans against nature, for instance, his consumer purposes may yield some results.

Nakagawa uses the manmade structures to sell us his view on social issues. Only in the works, Gas Mask, Martin Luther King, and Cowboy, does the combination ring true. The placement of the "Golden Arches," in McDowell's, over a cemetery, the marching Klan members, of KKK, in a flowering field, come off as heavy-handed.

Nakagawa acknowledges that he pastes these photographic "messages" onto his images of the screens or billboards. These images are then reprinted with some digital enhancement as normal color photographs. It is with this acknowledgment that he challenges the exhibition, and photographic, begins. The question arises: Did these images need to be created with digital assistance? The answer is a resounding maybe. If one reads the labels carefully, however, he or she would see, but missed the answer is yes. The descriptions of photographic medium ranged from the simplicity of Nakagawa's computer-altered photo output as Type C print to Eva Sutton's computer photomontage output by film recorded onto black-and-white sheet film, printed onto photo-sensitized paper and selenium toned work. With such oblique information, how could the viewer feel the technical wizardry was anything but necessary?

The technological aspects of digital assistance are nothing, if not a conundrum. Medium descriptions are minimally useful to other photographers, but here they could potentially lead viewers away from aesthetic concerns to those of pure technology. The question of digital assistance becomes more difficult to answer as the viewer tries to decipher the work's creation is what pulls the viewer back to the aesthetic issues.

Deinnie Sokolov openly acknowledges her images are not dependent upon digital assistance. Her work succeeds because of, once again, the disability to discern what she has done digitally. Sokolov's United 9 (which recalls a draped Victory of Samothrace), Untitled 10, and Embraced Head, all from the Covering series, are fine examples of the visual reality possible with computer enhancement. The covered objects, influenced by sitting Shiva, a Jewish mourning ritual, become fully sculptural as they float in a dark void. The texture of the sculpural cloth is all the more seductive as one feels he or she can reach in and envelop the works themselves.

The three untitled images by Nancy Beeson are much less seductive, but less visually intriguing. The anomalous portraits of children with cranial deformities are not real, but they could be. Although they are digitally-altered photographs, children and adults unfortunately suffer from such maladies. Sokolov's images for intentionally creating images of deformities. She is, however, challenging us to come to grips with the actuality of such deformity in the real world and to adopt a new way of looking at everyday.

The least challenging aspect of "Metamorphoses" was found in Blaffer's upstairs gallery where images using jet printing techniques were quietly tucked away into a corner. Despite the beauty of Olivier Parker's Homelessness, David Byrne's whimsical Clouds, Mannerpoons, Fruit, and, Eileen Cowin's mysterious narrative, Based on a True Story, the works here owe much more to the actual printing process than the technological possibilities of digital assistance. The potential expressive qualities of the two processes was inadequately shown and largely appeared as a commercial for Nash Editions, where these works were produced.

Many of the artists in "Metamorphoses" successfully bridge the gap between tradition and digital photography and dreams and reality. Just as many, though, are uncomfortable in these two worlds and rebellion to create imagery, they have not fully explored the capabilities of digital realization. Yet, given the chance, as traditional photographers have been, these artists can discover their creative niche within the medium.

Within the curatorial focus, the most provocative idea about computer generated imagery is that the artist is able to remove telltale signs of handwriting and reassemble an image at will, including the total removal of unwanted subject matter. The person creating the final image, hopefully the photographer in this case, has complete control over the resulting creative expression. There are other unknown fields to discover through digital assistance. The downside is that computer manipulation can be used to tangentially harm or falsely implicate individuals with altered imagery. Whatever its use, we are still a long way from fully accepting the possibilities of digital imagery as legitimate artistic expression.

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On Bill Thomas' works entitled Suicide

Fernando Castro

Editor's Note: Bill Thomas was a 1993-1994 Houston Center for Photography Fellowship recipient.

Not since Dostoevsky's character, Kirilov, killed himself to prove that God did not exist, has the representation of death all gone into the shadow and died as well as in Bill Thomas' Suicide series. But, alas, Kirilov's argument is now unsayable and Thomas' images are not of actual death but are rather a series of ideosyncratic performances representing self-elimination simulacra. What the artist presents us with are acts that could lead to suicide but in fact lead to photographic artworks.

In all of Thomas' portraits, death seems to follow as the result of intricately crafted, carefully designed apparatus whose cause and effect usually already been or are about to be set in motion. Except for Chain and Train, 1992 and Tub and Toaster, 1991 where death will follow as soon as somebody fortuitously opens the door at an unexpected time, Tub and Toaster, 1991 where the exact time of death is known because it has been intentionally set.

Thomas has been quite explicit in tracing the motivation for his Suicide series to his growing up at the peak of the Cold War. He explains, "To put this into a little bit of perspective, this was at the height of the Cold War—1959—so on at least a weekly basis we'd all go into the hallway and do the old duck-and-cover maneuver in case we got bombed—and we were, I think, all led to believe that any day the Bomb was going to come." The demented logic of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), which turned irrationality into common sense and rationality into a potentially lethal game, plagued the lives of millions of people for nearly forty years or the better part of Thomas' life. The nuclear threat that loomed over Thomas' life nearly meant the end of his own life.

But as this nightmare backdrop was gradually replaced by a more real catastrophe, "On Tuesday, September 15, 1959, a man carrying a suitcase loaded with books and a briefcase entered my elementary school," he recalled. "Mothers later detonated the bomb on the school playground, committing suicide, killing five others and wounding seventeen more. In the chaos that followed, we were evacuated from the building and inadvertently ushered past the bodies, stopping to avoid scraps of undeniable flesh. I was half-naked, half-terrified."

When the bomb went off the twelve-year-old Thomas was under the impression that it was the atom bomb for which the school children had been rehearsing. It is very tempting to say that henceforward the conjunction of MAD, emergency preparedness, and suicide were imprinted on Thomas' psyche. Our beliefs, however, are not casually determined by our experiences. After the childhood trauma Thomas could have chosen to avoid the subject of suicide altogether. Even if he had never lived through that trauma, he may have still done this work after a reading of Dostoevsky, Mishima or Camus. The tension between determinism and free will may very well be one of the important themes behind Thomas' intricate machines and skillful performances. Certainly, there are no traces of a 'Verkauft' in his works and the beauty of his tableaux indicate that his work are about something more logical than happenstance.

According to a sequence that Thomas himself has spelled out, the traumatic but repressed memory of the bombing at drove him first to psychoanalysis and eventually to the literature of totalitarianism, and finally to photography. By exposing repressed memories the individual may achieve a catharsis liberating him from his demons tormenting, Thomas' way is to expose himself in self-depiction as suicidal. His pursuit would be to a degree one were it not for one redeeming element in his works: it is a dark humor, indeed, that inspires a hilarious work such as Seashore and Ice Cafe, 1991 despite the imminent possibility of self-hanging. In this photograph, the lethal sadness is triggered by the diminishing weight of the ice as it melts. Like many of the other apparatus of self-destruction laboriously fabricated by Thomas, it unavoidably elicits laughter, together with Dog and Shotgun, 1991 and Knife and Iron, 1992. These are more the kinds of machines concocted by Wyley E. Coyote than by a self-destructive depressive. So, does Thomas intend to rob our reader of its seriousness, to make a joke of it? Not at all: humor, as proven by more than one surrealist, is not necessarily superficial; on the contrary, it can be, as in this case, quite revealing.

The sets of the Suicide tableaux are as intricate as they are ingenious and by the artist's own admission constitute "the most plausible part in the process of making a photograph." The final product of these endeavors is not suicide, nor the ephemeral act of rolleing allusion to the envy and iniquity of modern technological societies. The historical fact in question is that Bayard's photograph was motivated by the official denial of his claims of being one of the inventors of the photosensitive plate. The reproduction of this image of Bayard as photographer's first purported staged suicide victim expands the range of implications of his own work.

Ponder how very different Thomas' work would be if it is claimed to document suicides, like Witley E. Coyote's, or gruesome police photography of murder victims. In that case it would not be "artworks," as Thomas' 1993-1994 example is manually readymade because little was added by the author. Thomas' sets, as O. Winston Link's, combine varying ratios of "already-there" to "accidental" objects. For this and other parallels, the Suicide series is more closely related to Link's elaboration of "psychological" locomotives than to any reportorial work.

The works of Link are a late Romantic's celebration of a modern machine, Thomas' is an oblique reflection on the age of machinery that flourished in the nineteenth century and included photography in its flowering. The influence of modern technology on deadliness matters has been a matter of particular concern for art in the aftermath of World War I. The reason that Link's machinery not only changed production of goods, but also altered the realization of massively inflicting death in wars and envisaged the wholeness of life in the labor environment. Dadaists denned this situation with photomontages that often incorporated advertising for propaganda photographic images. His less well-known sets that give illusion of harmony present in 1950s commercial photography advertising electrical appliances. The toast of Tub and Toaster, 1991 is from that decade in which middle-class life was finally conquered by consumerism.

Our enduring fetish for machines such as cameras, locomotives, and toasters gives us a view on our own times in spite of the dark side of modern technology more easily discernible in guns and bombs. Nevertheless, Thomas' almost devotional celebration of machinery, his works do show some ambivalence about "machines" machines that at times borders on cynicism. Chain and Train, 1992 in fact, seems harried directly at Link, the eternal vandals Sleeping Pills and Tannings Bed, 1993 reveals the "double edged" nature of technology that while producing a healthy
look inflicts illness. Modernity's promises of a better life are thus redefined, at minimum, suspect. It is this critical side that places these works within a postmodern weltanschauung: the abandonment of the unquestioning trust in modern technology.

One must be careful, however, not to give excessive weight to a postmodern posture by Thomas, for it is evident that he takes an ironic stance regarding almost everything that comes into his pictures—his own death as author of his works included. Contrary to the radical view of interpretation that dispenses with the author, Thomas immolates his works against such abuse by placing himself, the author, into their very core. Although extrinsic to the works, the fact that they are self-portraits remains a crucial clue in their interpretation. To ignore the author would be to interpret these works as if they were not self-portraits. On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore Thomas' nuclear trauma in interpreting these works, but without that bit of biographical information the work would probably become more capricious, more idiosyncratic, and more subjective than the evidence suggests. In many of the works, the author overtly displays the act of releasing and/or shutting himself; this fact is germane to the interpretation that dissolves if someone other than the author released the shutter. Consequently, talk about Thomas' death, whether actual or pretended, imposes itself even into the most far-fetched interpretations.

In sum, insofar as it is both modern and postmodern, historian and current, paradoxical and resolute, Thomas' Suicide series is above all an extremely intelligent body of works. Though some have unreliably compared Thomas' art-producing machine to Dr. Kevorkian's euthanasia devices, the former is definitely—the latter is arguably—part of the process of producing life-affirming works. That they confront death self-caused does not diminish the fact that in them life emerges victorious. As in cummings' poetry, enduring life's wondrous intricacies, not death, is really their end. As cummings put it, "for life is not a paragraph. And death: i think is no parenthesis." After all, nobody in those images is touched by "death's wondering, guess," nor Bayard, not Thomas, the author.

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*A GRAVE*

A Grave Disease by Fannie Tapper at University of Texas Houston Health Science Center, June 19-August 11, 1995.

Jennifer Elkins

"Tell her the joyous Time will not be stayed unless she do Him by the Forlock take."—Edmund Spencer's sixteenth century words of wisdom reveal images of time-ravaged dreams, of songs never sung and memories yet unmade. Time shows no mercy; the grave always beckons but man chooses out of fear to ignore the inevitability of his own mortality and retreats. He retreats because he fears that in this inevitable fate lies the possibility that he will face his grave knowing at some level that he went through life never having lived. Now and then a man becomes conscious of the fact that time has stolen his dream and he may then decide to confront time by making a daring attempt to steal back the dream in hopes that at least some semblance of it can be salvaged or possibly that some piece of it could become reality and attest to a life fully lived. Fannie Tapper's exhibition "A Grave Disease" opens with the quotation from Spencer's sonnet and visually echoes his words while portraying the story of such a man, her husband, Wilfred. Tapper's images chronicle Wilf's illness over six years. As she states, "The photographs resulting from this period are not all easy to look at. They are harsh reminders of man's inability, finally, to order his own life. At the same time, many attest to human-kind's courage faced with real adversity and with this particular man's unfailing determination and optimism." Eliced Jenkins, Community Relations assistant at the University of Texas Houston Health Science Center, who wrote the photographs were exhibited this summer, commented on the viewer's response to these "difficult" images that reveal so poignantly man's desire to reconcile within himself the transitory nature of life and in the end confront his own mortality. According to Jenkins, "Women find these images compelling, while men are terrified of them." Tapper's photographs tell the story of one man's journey. The tale crosses gender lines and becomes a collective narrative of society. One man's story becomes everyone's story as people project their individual fears and anxieties onto the images.

The grave disease affection many does not just ravage the body, it first kills the soul. The feminist critique has dramatically pointed out the various wounds inflicted on women by the patriarchal but it must be recognized that a system characterized by the conscious intent to devalue and undermine one gender in the end will wound both genders.

The masculine grandstanding at the hands of the patriarchy is intensely portrayed in the exhibit's most dramatic piece of work, *Man under the Knife*. This brutal photograph was taken shortly after Wil underwent his fourth surgery to correct vision problems resulting from his diagnosis of Gravesc's Disease. Fannie states that it was only months before that Wil had decided to close his practice, to say goodbye to downtown and to seize the opportunity to realize the dream that had more and more drained and ground their conversations. "By Christmas we would be aboard our boat, christened, what else, Forlock, and by January we would be beached for the Christmas." This, however, was not to be; by March Wil had already undergone four operations in an attempt to save his vision.

Historically, the patriarchal system has warned that dreams and visions threats the rational and logical aspects of life. This devaluation of the imaginary life has caused a fear of the emotions associated with these imaginations, regarding them as potential for madness, or, worse yet, signs of the nineteenth century diagnosis of "hysteria," a woman's madness. The result has been to create artificial worlds isolated from the symbolic and denial of emotion. As one is unable to perceive that an acceptance of the inner madness and irrationality might possibly lead to a state of true inner freedom that lies dormant in the truths stored in these imaginations, and which in the end will reveal the essence of one's soul. As Pascal observed, "Men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another form.
of madness.” It seems evident in the context of these photographs that the cultural climate of the twentieth-century Western civilization derive from a system with the primary goal of containing madness. As it seeks to stifle the image, the vision is rendered impotent and the soul is sacrificed in order to attain the societal accolades necessary to create an illusion of life.

“The many people who sense their own needs and yet acquiesce in the prevailing system accept it in their minds by their deeds and thus confirm and strengthen it.”

With two more operations by the end of the year, Wit’s vision was stabilized. Fannie explains, “By March of 1991 we had leased our house and bought a new boat, this one named “Graves’ End,” and we were well into plans to leave on our long-dreamed-of cruise to Europe, and he had prostate cancer.” After several more postponed operations they were finally ready to embark on their trip but in October as they were cruising Chesapeake Bay, Wit was diagnosed with an ulcer requiring emergency surgery, thus ending the potential of making this dream into a reality. “The final episode to this saga is that in 1993, Wit discovered a concomitant muscular dystrophy, which required us to sell “Graves’ End” and move back home, close to the Texas Medical Center.”

“A Grave Disease” is one woman’s way of confronting time by putting distance between herself and the suffering of the body she loves. She has captured images that inform the viewer that “A Grave Disease” is about the intricate relationship between the body and the soul—the body so long ignored and the soul that has for years served as the sacrifice in a patriarchal system. Once again Spencer offers sixteenth century insight for the twenty-first century, “For of the soul the body formeth the vessel. For soul is form, and doth the body make.” A movement into the soul is a movement into the body and in this interaction both are potentially healed. The wounds at the hand of the patriarchal knife become the battle scars of the consciously-lived life.

Memories are those moments that one steals from the jaws of time. They serve to help re-member our lives. While Fannie Tapper’s images are “difficult” on a variety of levels, these memories chronicle a journey through the chaos of the human core often attest to one man’s courage to re-order and thus re-create a life that in its end is fully lived. For in the act of confronting Time, he found the place within himself where Time stands still.

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FOOTNOTE


* * *

WHEN ART AND SCIENCE COLLIDE


Peter Harvey

Descending the stairs to the main gallery, one is greeted by two speakers approximately a foot in diameter suspended from the ceiling. These speakers are not in any sort of enclosure—whose works are exposed in plain view. The diaphragms are pumping like two woodpecker at a disco, and yet the only sound they make is barely audible in a quiet gallery and indiscernible when more than two people are talking within earshot. The speakers, alive with movement and the potential for sound, resemble two surveillance eyes (mouches, ears) welcoming, broadcasting and beckoning to visitors. The electrical connections run through long, flexible conduit (the kind we used to call “goose neck”) resembling industrial optic nerves winding their way around a graphic panel and just under the door into the gallery. Inside, the cables wrap around the existing duct work until we see a third speaker facing a corner and a strange looking panel on the wall where these slowly pulsating lines meet and collect their signals. The label describes Off The Wall II, 1989 as “variable in dimension and constructed of wood, aluminum, electronics, and three speakers.”

Most of the pieces in the show are constructed of naked electronics. The wiring, cathode ray tubes, and circuit boards are not covered with an oversize cabinet as they would be in a home stereo or television because the form and composition of these components are integral to the sculptural experience of the show. As a young kid, I made a “hot dog cooker” out of a breadboard, two nails and a lamp cord (don’t try this at home). Wondering if my invention was thoroughly cooked, I once touched it while the contraption was plugged in and felt the cool, intense buzz of flowing electrical current. This experience returned to me as I considered the fact that I was not at all tempted to touch the exposed wiring and circuitry of the works in the show—no doubt, much more carefully designed and safer than my hot dogger.

As the exhibit’s title suggests, there is a biological element to the objects Alan Rath has created. The long cables of Off The Wall II undulate like snakes in a slow groove. Several of the pieces contain moving parts or corporeal images. Pulsating, whispering speakers are a recurring theme. The quiet motion continues on several cathode ray tubes in other pieces around the room displaying various body parts in motion. Ouch, 1993 is a self-portrait of sorts with a picture of the artist’s face on a cathode ray tube held in a vice. The image of the artist’s face in a pinched expression on the CRT involves the viewer in a sky commentary on mediated representation. The television becomes both signifier and signified: the CRT is squeezed in the vice and the expression on the face looks as though it were caught in a closing elevator door. The vice is mounted atop a wooden stool in an apparent homage to Duchamp. The electronic works of the piece dangle from the seat by a pair of black handcuffs. Appearing in more than one piece in the show, manacles suggest a close but involuntary relationship.

In Family, 1994 a few strategically stacked suitcases with speakers in them are cuffed to large chains leading to CRTs displaying close-up images of talking mouths. The baggage of the inescapable consanguine link is neatly addressed here sculpturally by developing a formal relationship between Rath’s objects and those created by Louise Nevelson, Edward Kienholz and some others, less central, art is forty years past “contemporary.” We are informed that Rath shares Donald Judd’s "beautiful aesthetic" because he had one hundred boxes made, providing him “a standard formal unit with which I can’t get a box of a dozen donuts anymore without considering the container a ‘standard formal unit’.” This line of art speaks. It doesn’t do justice to Rath’s ability to make a formally interesting piece that is full of meaning and accessible to the viewer. The strength of this combination is evident in Linguist, 1995 where the “abstract industrial forms” are combined with an image of a mouth on a CRT and a video game joystick. When a viewer manipulates the joystick, the tongue pops out of the mouth and kicks the lips in a pattern mimicking the movement of the controls. A visitor might stand there and move the tongue around while considering the meaning of the piece and the experience of participating in an act of art. By touching the joystick, the audience passes beyond “my kid could do that” and is enabled to reach “hey look what I’m doing.” The interactive nature of Rath’s work and its interpretation contribute to its successful subjectivity. In other words, if you have the money and you haven’t bought one of these pieces, you have some explaining to do.

Peter Harvey is a writer living in Houston.
"Kids today!" This phrase, often uttered in exasperation by the "older generation" referring to the "younger generation," has been repeated for many years. You may already be uttering this phrase after seeing Larry Clark's film Kids.

The press kit for the film describes this fictional drama as a cautionary tale, "twenty-four frenetic hours in the lives of a group of contemporary teenagers in the modern world." The story revolves around a group of teens from the skateboarding culture of New York City's Washington Square Park—"teenagers living in the urban vortex of modern-day America." The press release adds, "But while these kids dwell in the big city, their story could, quite possibly, happen anywhere."

The main story involves three teenagers—Telly, Cassie, and Jenny. The film opens with Telly talking to a unnamed girl (possibly thirteen years-old) into having sex with him. It is her first time, but he "cares about her" and thinks she will really enjoy it. Afterwards, he meets Casper who has been waiting for him out front for two hours. They spend the rest of the day roaming around town—from Telly's house, to a flop house where they can get food, to the park to buy drugs, to a party at Steve's "his parents are out of town." A long time, they steal beer from a convenience store, peaches from a fruit stand, and money from Telly's mother. They jump the subway turnstiles, urinate on the street, harass a gay couple, break into a gay bar while the police break into the public swimming pool after hours, sniff inhalants, smoke pot, drink beer (lots of beer), and talk almost constantly about sex. The mission for the day is to find Darcy, the fourteen-year-old sister of a friend, and have sex with her. His raison d'être is having sex with virgin. Cassie's personal mission for the day seemingly is to follow Telly around and get as wasted as possible.

We first meet Jenny in a bedroom with four other girls talking about sex. We learn she was "de-vided" by Telly a year ago, and even though he said he "cares for her," he has not talked to her since. The previous week, she had accompanied her friend Ruby to a clinic to get tested for HIV. Ruby wanted to be tested after watching a graphic film about HIV. In the clinic interview we learn that Ruby has had vaginal intercourse with "eight or nine guys" ("maybe four times unprotected") and anal intercourse "three, no four times" (only once protected). She is approximately nine years-old. Although Jenny, has only had intercourse once with Ruby to keep her company and is tested for HIV herself. Ruby tests negative and Jenny tests positive. Her personal mission for the day then becomes following down Telly and confronting him. She checks the flop house, a nightclub and finally the party at Steve's house.

There are two important factors to keep in mind. This film was directed by Larry Clark who is known for his garish, brutally frank, documentary photographs of a young drug subculture in America. Secondly, the screenplay was written by Harmony Korine, a nineteen-year-old author whose name does not have the necessary tools to accomplish this end. The characters are too shallow for us to learn anything from them. Cassie is the order for the audience to glean any knowledge from a story, changes in growth in the character during the course of the story is necessary. Since all the action takes place in twenty-four hours, they don't have enough time to learn anything. These kids end up where they started.

When Telly and Casper go to the park to buy drugs, they run into a group of kids. The extras in this scene seem to be very self-conscious in front of the camera. This is probably a basic problem with this film. Watch a fourteen-year-old in a group of adults—if the child does something cute in the way that gets the adults' attention, the child will repeat that action endlessly to hold that attention. The writing of this film seems to be all about repetition of one point at which some words of wisdom could be offered, but the writer chooses otherwise. Perhaps the writer gives advice that any kid wishes adults would give. In a cab, Jenny talks to the driver about the fact you have to take Jenny she looks so sad. When asked what's wrong, she says "Everything's wrong." So what words of advice does the neglected, sad offer? "Forget about it. Life is too short, so try to be happy." Just forget about it and don't worry about the fact you have a terminal illness. The treatment of the adult characters in the film in typical of a teenager's attitude. Telly's room bums him to get a job and lies to him about not having money. The two other adults in the film are the parents who are the court-and-sexual aggressors who conquer and then go on their way. The girls are the blushing, sexual passive-who are left alone to deal with the consequences of their actions. This is most vividly played out when Jenny finally finds Telly at the party while he is having sex with Darcy. Instead of actually confronting him, she looks at the party and then turns and leaves the room. After she passes out on the couch from the effects of the drugs, Casper comes around and quietly assaults Jenny while the other kids sleep in their drugged and drunken state. Jenny's room bums him to use and get as wasted as possible. There is no story that can capture the reality of a diverse American society. What he has captured is the reality, or hyper-reality, of a society of skateboarders in a small section of New York City. This is not to deny that the issues addressed are problems throughout the United States. But there are many other adolescents who, for a variety of reasons, have experienced, or are experiencing a completely different day-to-day reality.

Clark has attempted to portray a "true" teenage experience but has instead given us a bleak, hopeless view of small segment of teenage society. And he does so with cliches, sexist attitudes and shallow characters. At the end of the first scene of the film, as Telly is leaving the obviously uppish middle class home of his latest conquest, he leans over a stairway railing and spits on the dining room table. This action may sum up the filmmaker's intention. It is good to question societal norms and, from time to time, issue a warning to help people address society's problems. However, if you spit at the people you're attempting to reach, they may not want to hear you.

Michael G. DeVoll is another artist who has given up still photography to pursue the moving image. He works as HOP's Assistant Director.
At the end of the book, however, it becomes clear that Meyerowitz's particular brand of effusiveness stems from his own experiences in a small group of mid-1960s and 1970s American, New York-based photographers, all of whom had the dedication and good fortune to be well-received and well-recognized within the field. All naturally drew on the full scope of the street tradition, with an emphasis on the branch that started with Jacob Riis and Weegee, and later manifested in William Klein and Robert Frank. Within Westerbeck's text it quickly becomes clear for most of the photographers of the nineteenth century as well as a long period of practitioners—Lartigue and Doisneau come to mind—for whom "toughness" was not part of their visual vocabulary, joy and magic; the medium offers a "decisive moment" is in the street itself brought to life for the image through light and film, a moment revealed by the photographer's subjective process of selection that is not unlike a sculptor's removal of just enough of his subject to leave a finished, polished, coherent statement. It is a "tough" image not in its subject matter but in its form, first in its angularity and its severity of subject, and then more importantly in its aesthetic as a finished photographic print demanding a knowledge of modernism for full appreciation. The photographer ending this section, also by Carrie Bresson, is a brilliantly titled counterpart to the famous image of a blurred figure of a man about to step into a puddle, his heel caught the instant before it touches the glassy water; his movement echoed by a dancer silhouetted on a poster in the background. However, Bresson offers to both practitioner and viewer.

Inside, each of the book's four sections opens with a succinct introduction to the photographers. The images are not all well-known ones, thus giving insight into the breadth and depth of the tradition. Appearing in pairs and groups across pages, they are edited to complement each other with formal, tonal, geometric and geographic connections so smooth they vary between the reveratory and the coy. So presented, each image becomes newly resonant terms by references lying within the tradition itself—other street photographers that until now had little or no bearing on each others' meanings and intentions. One wishes for brief insight from the authors into the thought guiding this editing.

Westerbeck's lengthy text rewards close reading. He writes as a well-versed, if not an intimate, associate curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago) and both authors received support through 1960s and 1970s critiques, discussions with the photographers themselves, historians and curators. The one notable exception is Robert Frank, whose self-published book The Americans, remains one of the only photographers in this genre consistently capable of dodging his viewers' expectations and even eliciting anger.

That this book was so long in the making is a measure of the information that consistently illuminates motives and currents among these images meticulously and synthesized history and biography superbly. For example, early street portraits by photographers as different as Eugene Atget and John Thomson are read not as prototypes of "real" street-photography but as unique portraits in their own right fraught with the tension between the photographers' technical skill and their inability to produce truly candid images and their simultaneous acquisitiveness to values of the time that led them to "steal" (take photographs) the way his audience wanted.
ONE LIFE—SEVERAL LANDSCAPES
AN APPRECIATION OF ROBERT ADAMS

Peter Brown

“Over the years I have come to believe...that we live in several landscapes at once, among them the landscape of hope, and that though we must usually focus on what is characteristic of the immediate and troubled present, it is rash to say that other geographies are unimportant or even finally separate.” Robert Adams

I.

In Japan, as you probably know, there exists a wonderful and humble (if not downright paralyzing) designation—that of “living national treasure,” a governmental honor that is bestowed on people, rather than things. It occurred to me recently, that if such a distinction existed in this country that the photographer and writer Robert Adams would, by this time, have been nominated for it. His name, I found myself imagining, would have been forwarded on—probably repeatedly—to whatever bureaucratic office exists for these wise, gentle old people. Handled on up the chain with great warmth and conviction, until it reached the executive committee (composed no doubt of a few road-weary senators, governmental flacks and with the emil- ient ium salutum in the background). And then...embraced with confusion would reign, for the committee to its relief, after reviewing Adams and his work would decide that: first, the man simply not old enough. “He’s not!” they would exclaim indignantly. (And happily for us all, it’s true.) Secondly however, unless they were visually illiterate, which of course could be a real possibility, they would have to recognize that the truths that Adams and his beautiful, burned photographs tell are finally too unsettling and too persuasive for an environmentally vacuous government to raise to sainthood. For Adams—as insightful and eloquent a photographer as any country might claim (armed as he is with the history of literature as well as that of photography) is simply too reasoned, too generous and finally too dangerous to be enshrined. (If all honesty though, it should be pointed out that he’s been awarded every honor a photographer might aspire to—NEAs, Guggenheim, a Peer Award and now a MacArthur—but still...I think Jesse and the Freshmen might raise a cloud of toxic dust stamping their feet over national hero status.) Robert Adams’ work has been enormously influential, both to a wide viewing public, and also, perhaps particularly, to photographers of my generation. As I have considered it over the years, the work has always seemed a sustaining and challenging mix of beauty, hope, despair, anger and love. It’s clear that Adams cares passionately for the American West, his home and window on the rest of the world—and his struggle for the past thirty years has been to suggest new ways of looking at and thinking about our world—what we have lost and what we might do with the ground that remains with us.

He does this in the most self-effacing way. Not since the Iceland trip has there been a time Adams has seemed so approachable. He’s no dilettante sitting at a reasoned distance. He is in there in the fray—but the voice he uses is one that both indoct and bleues at once. And it’s a voice of complicity—he’s hard on himself as well. His work asks us to notice the remarkable gifts we’ve been given, to see clearly for the mess we’ve made of them, to stop and consider, and then to emerge, determined to recognize and create a landscape that’s worthy of the best in us.

Not a simple set of observations or requests, and of course not an easy table to set for others to gather round—simply asking such questions often leads to self-righteousness and defensiveness. But Adams weaves a visual and rhetorical fabric that makes common ground and common sense, and he spreads it for us with unison grace and humility.

Adams is normally a landscape photographer—despite an anomalous but moving book Our Lives and Our Children on the people who live near the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant—and a landscape photographer primarily of the high plains around his, Longmont, Colorado home. But his work also ranges throughout Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska and the Dakotas, up onto the eastern slope of the Rockies, over the rim, into the Great Basin and out to the West Coast. His photographs are often thought of as sparse—though this has always seemed as much a function of geography as compositional choice to me—and they are generally small to mid-sized black and white prints. It is work that I believe would be accessible to almost anyone.

On an abstract level, the photographs seem a marriage of formal grace and social engagement, images that singly or in series are capable of conveying respect for the charged, the charged for the spiritual to the most secular—fully dimensioned truths finally, in which fact and beauty coexist.

He is the author of fourteen books, most of them published by Aperture. In the past year, he has produced four extraordinary volumes—two of photographs and the third, a collection of essays. Each of these is worth spending time with and each is worth revisited. Adams, who holds a doctorate in English and writes as convincingly as anyone in the photographic community, has collected much of his writing from the past few years in Why People Photograph, his first book of essays since Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values came out in 1981.

Listening to the River: Seasons in the American West, published in fall 1994, is an extended sequence of Colorado landscapes—interrelating photographs presenting a complex, geographically and seasonally shifting set of panoramas. His third book, West from the Columbia, 1995 explores new territory: the land and sea around the mouth of the Columbia River as it spurs into the Pacific. Cottonwoods, 1994, published by the Smithsonian Institution Press in its Photographers at Work series is a graceful compilation of thirty photographs that Adams has made of cottonwood trees over the years—a body of work that spans from the 70s to the present. The book includes, as well, a revealing interview with Adams in which he discusses his feelings for the West, the mix of environmental and aesthetic concerns that fill his work, and his affection for cottonwood trees: their existence and treatment being symbolic in a way, of all that is best and worst about the West. All told, these books represent a remarkable year’s harvest—and though each was many years in the making, they’re a testimony to Adams’ MacArthur Grant, a multi-year fellowship that Adams received a year ago.

II.

Listening to the River is one of the most enveloping photographic books I have encountered. In it, small black-and-white vertical photographs of commonplace Colorado landscape are grouped—up to six photographs per two-page spread—with the images interrelating first one to another, then page to page. Adams’ subtitle is Seasons in the American West and in the book, a variety of currents are charted: seasonal, geographic, image
to image, page to page, until the book as one finds oneself rolling, bumping, smoothly gliding, dropping precipitous becomes a river itself.

And it is aural as well as visual: we hear silence at first, the resonance of the plains, birdsong perhaps, then the rustle of leaves, the slap and rattle of water, wind through grass, branches being pushed back as we make our way through the landscape. It is altogether a sensual book, helped in this respect and others, by William Stafford's fine poems, which contribute to a mix of image and text that moves along smoothly—graceful turns, slow ebb and flow, interesting detours, now and then a surprised trout. One feels the heat bouncing up from a stabled field, cold feet from slushy snow, gentle spring winds, smells of rain and hot asphalt, the rumble of trucks, the prickle of a milkweed pod on the back of a hand, winding barbed wire.

And the landscape varies—from open prairie crossroads and fields, to suburban streets and homes, to roadside trash, to footballed heights and back down to fields and the plain. Up and down, back and forth, our vision shifting from side to side to take in these shifting panoramas.

The sequence begins in what seems to be late summer, goes through a quick fall, into winter and mud season, and then an extended spring and summer. Before this publication, I had not often seen Adams use a vertical format and never, to my knowledge, a 35mm camera which it wielded throughout in a bobbing, weaving almost corrective ways the same tree or field or horizon seen from slightly different points—a step to the left, two to the right—a way of photographic seeing that closely approximates the way we actually see. The use of the 35mm camera, with all its ease portability, lends itself well to the idea behind the book, which in essence is a series of walks in places that Adams knows well.

The book has some of the feeling of Perfect Times/Perfect Places, Adam's love poem on the relatively unspoiled Pawnee National Grasslands. But Listening to the River includes more: junked up mattresses, kids at rivers, geese flying over suburban streets, cottonwoods just hanging on life beside something he has loved that has been beaten down, or pointing out a sacramental moment that ordinarily would evade us allows this alchemy to take place for us all. The book is not just plastic bags flapping on fences and it's not all meadowlarks—though it's more pleasing than heavy metal. It is mostly a mix that becomes, when seen in its riffing order—sad, glorious, open, pathetic, backbone shrieking beautiful, whole, and in the end, redemptive. It's a great and eye-opening year-long walk. Leaves, Pebbles and sand might pour out as the pages are turned.

III

I find Adams' writing rewarding and useful—and the essays that make up Why People Photograph are a fine introduction. Adams's writes with a clarity unusual in the art world and with an intelligence that ranges widely—literature, politics, American history, the history of photography and painting, religion, native American culture—all are brought to bear on his feelings about photography and its role in contemporary culture.

Adams' writing is simply clear. He is as careful with his sentences as he is with the construction of his photographs—a true parallel existing between the structure of his writing and that of his visual work: both I think finally set out to reveal in simple and transparent ways the wholeness of a complex idea.

"What Can Help," the first of three sections in the book, is addressed to photographers trying to survive in the art world. The chapter titles are: illuminatingly: "Collectives," "Humbly," "Collectors," "Writing," "Teaching," "Money," and "Dogs." He takes all of these things seriously. It's difficult to survive and do one's work and Adams is like the eloquent coach or teacher you never had quite enough time with—experienced, caring, poked off, funny, eyes and mind open, optimistic—able to put into words all the shadowy careerist, ethical questions that plaque you—and the equally murky self-serving answers you come up with, everything bumping together at three in the morning as you flop around, waking your spouse, wondering why life dealt you the hand of "art photographer" [a deviant and weirdly coded description from the very start].

But Adams is charitable and generous—and he has helpful advice. The first two essays in the book I think are illustrative. In "Collectives," he lines out the qualities that he finds admirable in his photographer friends—traits displayed in his own life and work as well the ability to make compelling pictures, animation and enthusiasm in relationship to subject matter; the fact that these people dont tempt him to envy [see above]; their physical courage in dangerous situations, and their mental courage in withholding the psychic damage which often produces; their ability to continue on in the face of possible loss of artistic vision; an ability also to retreat in

Robert Adams, From West From the Maine, 1995

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orderly ways when confronted by im-
possible odds, and finally their aware-
ness of finality and of their placement in
the natural world. All of this de-
scribes, if you stop to think about it, a
kind, generous and committed group of
people. We are reminded of what we
have. Not only that we are not
alone, but that these we travel with
are interesting and, for the most part,
well intentioned, kind and courageous
people. And we need as much of this
sort of thinking in the photo com-

munity as we can get.

His essay on humor levels a spot-
light on both "funny photographs" and
those humorous images that have a
staying power beyond the punch
line. Adams is famous for his lack of
patience with juxtapositional, ironic,
"pink flamingo" photography that
those in the know" often produce to
exhibit cultural credentials in relation-
ship to others not so knowing—a kind
of photography that falsely demean and
momentarily elevates simultaneously.

The best funny photographs he says,
"have something in common: We can
see in them that the subjects know
they are part of a joke, and their
awareness excuses us from the discom-
fort that we might otherwise feel in
smiling. The pictures are given to us
by all parties, and so invoke affections
and identification rather than ridicule.
And in this welcoming idea I think he
sums up a general creed—almost a
photographic golden rule: Be honest,
but be kind. Understand your inten-
tions well and treat your subject
matter as you would those you love.

England, Szarkowski, Morris
and Benson's response to Atget;
Sussan Sussan's courageous
Late American Photographs or
Laura Gilpin's particular gifts
move him deeply.
The final essay, "Working
Conditions" examines issues of
land and landscape in the West,
in both the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries. The three
equations are a concise and sober-
ning summation of what has
happened and what we might do.
While his stance is by no
means overtly political, the
ramifications of his thought cer-
tainly are, and the sense of loss
he conveys is immediate. Adams
knows the West well as a child
and the West he knew no longer
exists. It is this loss finally that I
think most informs and moti-
vates him.

He speaks a number of times
about pain, about being one of
the well-learners of genuinely
positive art—if the necessity of
experiencing tragedy in order to
create wholeness. And Adams' loss
(not just liquid) of an Edenic
West, is a personal, as well as
national tragedy that has pro-
duced a powerful set of
images, images that set out to
reclaim a land that only with
time and work, can once again
inch towards wholeness.

What else finally is one to
do—other than grind away in
bitterness at one's or move off
into exile? The latter being an
option that Adams examines
closely in his own life, and one
that he and his wife Kerstin
finally reject. His final response,
like his work, is both practical
and meditative. He mentions
a number of concrete measures
that might be taken legislatively
to recreate the space and stillness
that once existed in the West, and he
talks of creating a long walk, a
pilgrimage of sorts that might be
taken in the Plains, a contemplative
journey in which thought and the
natural world might once again peacefully join.

IV.
Adams' new photographic book,
West from the Capitol, becomes
a kind of benediction, in the same way
I think some rivers do as they reach
the sea. It is a quiet, culling book. Not
a tall-tale—in this its own wake, and
not a wakening dream either. It medita-
tive despite its historical notes, a book
of safety, despite the communism
and remnants of first growth forest
represented, a book finally I think,
about the beneficence of vast
and vast seas.

Adams and his wife Kerstin have
vacationed in the Oregon town of
Astoria for three years, a respite, they
say, from the damaged plains and
mountains of the interior. And in
this time he has not photographed
the coastline. It's clear however,
that he has stored up ideas. He knows this
world well and the wonder with which
he deals it with, I think, reflects his
memory of a much less troubled West.
There are a number of new
things that he considers in this book—the
first being place. While the ocean is,
in many ways, similar to the plains, it is
doing of course, quite different. And
while Adams has photographed rivers
before—even up to the Missouri, there
are few as vast as the Columbia. It's
interesting to think of the way he
might have photographed the tall
grass prairie, say, in the eighteenth
century with its eight to nine foot
stalks and blades, the wind pattern
cutting through them like water. Is them there
might have been an equivalence to ocean
waves, to tidal surges, to river
water meeting the sea. And in West From the Capitol,
time, immediate split second time, is consistently orga-
nized. One waits for clouds or wind or the sun or another pattern to be just
right inland, but the waves in this
book are moving fast, and a new kind
of visualization is at work in and to make sense of them within
this immensity.

The work achieved here has often
been technically and physically difficult,
yet despite difficulties, an effortless
quality remains about the sequence, a
clearing out of patterns, a natural
rhythms—of waves and rivers and
shifts, shifting visions of phased images
which are weakening from bright mornings to foggy after-
noon to comforting nights.

And always the rocking sea and the
surfing river serve to create a visual
music—of foghorn, sort, crying gulls,
chugging boats, distant bells, children's
voices, and somewhere, deep within
the mystery of that fathomed nourish-
ing water, the sound even of whale
song.

West From the Capitol acts as a
blessing because this river and the
Pacific Ocean combine to form one for
our country. And Robert Adams, quite
simply, has photographed them
with great and transparent skill.
In the beauty of river and ocean, in
the never ending strength, and in
the natural reconciliation of opposites
that they represent, grace and exhilaration
are given. Unasked for, absorption
can be felt, transgressions may seem
absurd—and we are sent back into
our world, momentarily redeemed,
energized and ready for the difficulties
that will always confront us. This
book, to the benificent extent that
graphy is able, serves to do the
same.

Peter Brown is a Houston photographer. His
work focuses on his family and the landscape
of the Great Plains. He teaches photography in
the Continuing Education Program at Rice
University. Peter Brown will have an exhibition
of his Great Plains work at Harris Gallery in
Houston during Fotofest.

FOOTNOTES
EARLIE HUDNALL
Margaret Culbertson

The black-and-white photography of Earlie Hudnall, university photographer for Texas Southern University and board member of the Houston Center for Photography, was displayed in one of the Project Row Houses, 2500 Holman, from April 21 to September 24, 1995. The small row house used for the exhibition formed a light-filled exhibit space conducive to a show of this size. It also contributed a certain poignancy, since such row houses would undoubtedly have been familiar to many of the people in the photographs.

The show consisted primarily of portraits in which Hudnall captured distinctive individuals within strong compositional frameworks and with lovingly preserved details of skin, clothing, and surroundings. He included young and old subjects in both urban and rural environments. His documentary approach and attention to detail fit in the tradition of Walker Evans, although Hudnall's photographs are often lighter and contain more humor. Hudnall's discretely simple, straightforward images are full of visual interest, joy, sorrow, and wisdom.

The photograph My Thinking Time demonstrates Hudnall's use of strong compositional elements that are reinforced by details. In the photograph, an elderly woman is caught as she pauses, looking away from the camera, to contemplate a rose. She is dressed simply, with curls in her hair, and she leans against the handle of a hoe. The woman's body and the handle of the hoe form a solidly grounded, central triangle, while her projecting elbow and arm form another powerful triangular element. This compositional framework is complemented by striking details including the veins on the woman's hand as it rests on her hip, the wrap of loose hair hanging by her ear, the angles of her curls, and the rose that has caught her gaze. The title reinforces the impression that this is a restorative moment of peace in a busy, work-filled life.

Hudnall's photographs show a beauty that can emerge from difficult circumstances, but they do not ignore disquieting effects of poverty and social neglect. However, this was not a show with a socialistic political or social agenda. The photographs were rich with the variety and pleasures of humanity, and viewing the exhibition was a rewarding experience.

Margaret Culbertson is head of the William R. Jenkins Architecture and Art Library at the University of Houston.

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The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The museum's year-round film/video exhibition program showcases the best of independents, local premieres, revivals, and foreign films.

The museum also distributes a circulating collection of Film and Video by Robert Frank, comprising fifteen titles.

The award-winning video Fire in the East: A Portrait of Robert Frank is available for sale on VHS for $24.95.
On View at
Blaffer Gallery
June 8 through July 28
Opening Reception: June 7
7:00 - 9:00 p.m.

works by:
Pacita Abad
Sung Ho Choi
Y. David Chung
Ken Chu
Marlon Fuentes
Jin Soon Min
Hung Liu
Takako Nagai
Long Nguyen
Manuel O'Campo
Sisavath Panyathip
Hanh Thi Pham
May Sun
Masami Teraoka
Mitsuo Toshido
Tseng Kwong Chi
Toi Ungkavatanapong
Zarina
Baochi Zhang

Blaffer Gallery is located on the campus of the University of Houston, Entrance #16 off Cullen Boulevard.

Gallery hours: Tuesday through Friday 10:00 am through 5:00 pm
Saturday and Sunday 1:00 pm through 5:00 pm